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NISIOISIN

Ikusamonogatari

Battle Story

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Chapter Wedding

Hitagi Honeymoon

001

There was something odd about the name Araragi Hitagi. No matter how I try, it just doesn't sit right with me. If I count from our freshman year at Naoetsu Private High School, where we became classmates, I've known her for almost a decade. Yet every time I see this name, it feels as unfamiliar as if we've only just met. And if I'm asked whose fault that unshakable strangeness was, I can say with absolute confidence that it was none other than mine. but still it felt as though trying to force together two jigsaw pieces that don't fit.

Look at the joints; they're practically crumbling.

It was at the hallowed grounds of North Shirahebi Shrine, in presence of its god herself, that I swore with my life on the line that I would make her happy. She's irreplaceable. Despite that, after getting married as we did, I had the hideous feeling that I was smearing the most precious aspect of the person I should hold most dear in my life, the one and only Senjougahara Hitagi, with cheap paints. It was an indescribably disgusting, queasy feeling.

I know, at least as general knowledge, that wedding dresses and white bridal kimono carry the symbolism of something pure, "dyeing yourself in your partner's colors". But that knowledge feels outdated, quaint at best. The fact is that I've robbed my spouse of something precious, something fundamental— her name. It's a wound that stings, one I'll carry for the rest of my life. Frankly, it makes me doubt whether I can even build a happy home.

How unfair, how unjust.

How utterly tragic.

It's impossible not to feel guilty over this, like I've caused someone harm.

"It's fine, Koyomi. I really don't mind. In fact, I think it flows better than before. Hitagi Araragi. It has a nice rhythm, rolls right off the tongue. Almost like it was always meant to be this way."

That's what she tells me. But the weight of imposing this burden

unilaterally on someone who should be my equal isn't so easily brushed aside. If anything, her reassurance only deepens my guilt. I know she means it, but it's still burdensome. There's the practical side of things, updating her driver's license, passport, My Number card. And beyond that, there's the undeniable violence of it: using the law as a cudgel to rip away the name she's lived with for a quarter of a century.

Isn't that, by any measure, an unforgivable act of barbarism?

It feels like domestic abuse right out of the gate.[1]

The life of Araragi Koyomi had always been one of ceaseless battles against all kinds of unreasonable circumstances. So, even now, he should continue to fight for the sake of his family name. But this time, his opponent was not a monster, nor was it a mystery or tale of supernatural transformation, regrettably—it was the nation of Japan itself.

Well, it could be argued that there wasn't much difference between the nation of Japan and its world of supernatural creatures, but I can't simply let that claim go unchallenged. As an experienced public servant, someone who had truly sworn loyalty to both the nation of Japan and its people, it was hard to advocate for the immediate abolition of the antiquated custom of married couples sharing the same surname. After being transferred to the FBI for advanced training and subsequently being headhunted for employment, and after buying my own home there, I found myself questioning my own patriotism.

Naturally, if we were to go by logic alone, rather than Hitagi legally becoming Araragi Hitagi, I would have become Senjougahara Koyomi. In fact, I had secretly been working on this plan behind the scenes. At first, everything was going smoothly, but the surreptitiously obtained written documentation was soon discovered by her. Hitagi, that is.

Well done, I must say.

"You've always been 'Araragi' to me, ever since we met. And—don't take this the wrong way— but I don't want you carrying my father's name. The name 'Senjougahara.'"

Okay.

The latter half aside, I feel exactly the same about the first part. No matter how I rationalize it, I can't shake the feeling that we've been

steamrolled by societal norms.

Sure, the law technically allows either spouse to take the other's name. But in practice, it's almost always the man's surname that's chosen. Logically I understand. But the thing is, I'm not one to be defeated by logic.

As I recall, the family of Hachikuji—the god worshiped within the grounds of North Shirahebi Shrine, where I pledged myself in marriage—all bore the mother's surname, Tsunade. But alas, as the twin-tailed lost god once confessed to me:

"We took my mother's name, Tsunade. But in the end, it didn't work out. 'Family' became 'former family.' They divorced when I was in third grade, and I had to change my name, too. What was even the point?"

She said it breezily, and back then—young and trying to act cool—I brushed it off with a casual "Yeah, that happens." But now that I'm the one facing these legal procedures, I can't help but dwell on it.

Even setting aside my role in law enforcement (and it's not exactly fitting for a public servant to say this) the whole thing reeks of bureaucratic nonsense. I inherited my job as a police officer from my parents (albeit reluctantly), but I never wanted to force my name on anyone.

If this had been the Hitagi of our high school days, especially during her most intense and edgy years, she would've stapled my mouth shut before letting me keep Araragi.

She wouldn't have surrendered her father's name. Has time softened her? Then again, maybe it's not just her. Maybe I've grown up, too.

Back in my youth, or rather in high school, I'd have said to myself, "Then screw marriage. If we're protecting our identities, we don't need some scrap of paper binding us. We'll live together without sharing a name. Hell, let's move in with Oikura too while we're at it."

Though in the end, as usual, it would most likely have led to a not-so-happy but rather bad ending. But inside the mind of twenty-four-year-old Araragi Koyomi, countless unbearable adult rationalizations came rushing in like a storm, saying, "Well, but things don't usually work out that way, do they? When you are a member of society, you must take reputation and position into account, and in the long run, Hitagi might also find it hard to live such a stubborn life. Besides, it's self-

evident that various procedures would become troublesome if we don't enter the marriage registry, so, on the contrary, if it's just a matter of a single piece of paper, it would be best not to fuss about it and get it over with."

But wait, what's this? Has Araragi-kun suddenly become so enlightened that he begins to admonish all those ordinary families who have married uncomplainingly and blandly, keeping their own surnames? The times have changed. Nowadays, you can even go by your maiden name at work. Don't be so annoying and nitpicky about it. People like that aren't popular, you know?

In all honesty, the idea of living with Oikura is tolerable, but the notion of taking Hitagi as a common-law wife is rather unsavory. As a career officer of the Japanese police force and an unofficial member of the FBI, it wouldn't be surprising if I suddenly died in the line of duty, at least to the same extent as that hellish Spring Break. With the chances of an unforeseen accident being about fifty-fifty, I would rather avoid a situation where Hitagi might be kept from witnessing my final moments due to a bureaucratic technicality like a discrepancy in our last names. I'm sure everyone is well aware of how prone I am to life-threatening situations. No insurance company would ever enroll me in a life insurance policy.

On the other hand, the reverse was also a possibility.

Hitagi worked in the Japanese branch of a foreign financial firm, and you might think her life wouldn't be in any real danger. But she once confided that because she deals with massive amounts of money within the company daily, when she's seriously out and about, she needs the accompaniment of bodyguards who cling to her like stalkers. I'm not sure if she was pulling my leg, but every time she leaves her home, she carries the latest version of her will with her.

"How strange it is, I was once swindled out of all my possessions, and now my job is akin to that of a swindler, treating strangers' money as my own and making it multiply incessantly—through stocks, foreign exchange, and cryptocurrencies that I'm not even sure really exist. It's all an enigmatic, ethereal mystery."

Though her words carried a hint of self-mockery, it was because she had been both a pampered heiress in a mansion and a penniless tenant in a wooden box that she had managed to acquire certain skills. Good or bad, she believed that money was but an illusory thing.

Of course, that's not to say that she could approve of the person she

was when she lost her weight and her mother… no, that too was a cherished memory and a cherished trauma.

It could never be forgotten.

Right.

Those were the life experiences of *Senjougahara Hitagi*. Could they really be covered up with just my surname? As if erasing her individuality.

“I think the name change is fun, like a game. But why do you care so much, Koyomi? Is it because you’re thinking of another person?”

“Another person?”

It’s hard to ignore the seemingly lighthearted remark that it’s like a fun game, it feels all the more like an attempt to escape reality. But for now, let’s let it slide. So, who could this other person be?

“Shinobu. Although I’m not sure if I can call her a person. Come to think of it, Koyokoyo, wasn’t it during that Spring Break that you cruelly stole her name?”

Koyokoyo.

The endearing nickname I miss so much…

I also used to call her by the nickname “Gahara-san,” but after she changed her surname, I could no longer address her in this way. It’s embarrassing for adults like us to use such nicknames, but hearing that I could never use it again made me feel as if I had been deprived of a basic human right, leaving me in a state of distress.

It was true, no matter how you put it: the King of Aberrations, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade—the name of the vampire who has lived for six hundred years.

But it was taken from her, just like life itself.

After losing her prestigious title, the oddity specialist Oshino Meme gave her a new name—Oshino Shinobu.

The man in a Hawaiian shirt said, employing his specialist’s surname as a constraint, he would seal her away, deeply and securely.

Which, to be honest, was contradictory and riddled with double

standards. Yet, for me, calling her Oshino Shinobu resonated truer and felt more befitting for her as I have known her by that name for longer.

Of course, nobody refers to her as Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade nowadays, but there seems to be a faction of specialists who still call her the “Old Heart-Under-Blade.”

Old Heart-Under-Blade.

What an antiquated name.

“When you think about it, it’s a strange and wonderful thing to have the word ‘old’ added to your name. Don’t you think so, Old Gahara-san?”

“Indeed, if you are going to keep calling me that, I don’t want to continue this conversation.”

“I have already felt the guilt of taking away someone’s name… What the heck’s going on with this marriage, it’s like a recrimination for me.”

“So practically a remarriage.”

“No, still my first marriage.”

Although this example exposed the depths of my subconscious, it didn’t entirely resolve the issue which had already taken deep root. It seemed that because I had done it once before, I no longer cared about doing it again now, as if to say that killing one person was the same as killing two. This frightening thought was something that neither Japan nor America would endorse.

Rather, should we not learn from our mistakes?

That had been an emergency measure taken out of necessity for Shinobu, so it couldn’t be said that it was entirely wrong… In this day and age, I can’t help but think there might have been another way to do it. It’s hard not to question whether my decision to barely keep alive by turning the vampire—the King of Aberrations—that otherwise faced certain death, into my slave, was an immature one, driven by a child’s desire for simplicity.

Even as the former Heart-Under-Blade happily gobbles on Mister Donuts in my shadow… And since it’s acceptable to use your original family name in the workplace, why then must we discriminate and not

apply the same rule to other situations?

With this in mind, I might as well create a business card featuring my Senjougahara pseudonym at work. I wonder if it's possible to mark your old name on the police officer's guidebook. I'd have to ask Chief Kouga about that next time.

"A seemingly insignificant battle, huh? Ah, yes, an infinitesimally small skirmish indeed."

"Sounds like you're saying 'overmorrow's tomorrow.'"

"Even if you were to take the name Senjougahara, it wouldn't make any difference. It won't even make you feel better. It's like we share the same hardships, but it's not the same at all, it's not. The constant labeling of hardships might be painful as well."

"Do we have no choice but to fight against the state?"

"That'd be quite the unexpected turn of events. Just imagine your high school supporters, they would be flabbergasted as they watch Araragi Koyomi take on the world of politics in a sequel."

"But I can't overlook those die-hard fans' support. So, should I run for office under the name Senjougahara Koyomi?"

"In that case, to ease the voter process, it might be best to simplify the complex kanji in 'Senjougahara,' say, using hiragana instead."

"Must I change my name even if I run for office? Just because it's hard to write. What a troublesome thing, follows me everywhere. But revolutionaries didn't use their real names either."

"Are we talking about starting a revolution now, like Hanekawa-san?"

"I can't use my real name to run a campaign and cause trouble for my parents. I'm not that unfilial."

"I wonder about that. It may not be limited to revolutionaries. Nowadays, it seems that a pseudonym one can choose themselves is more valued."

The conversation had delved into the complicated topic of real names versus pseudonyms… In such an era when anonymity is held in high regard, aren't real names becoming more important than ever? Apparently, in the past, one could not reveal their real name to anyone other than their parents.

“I’m not sure if I can let such a thing be erased on a whim.”

“Was marrying me also on a whim, Koyomi?”

“I retract my previous statement and apologize under the name of Senjougahara Koyomi.”

“You are apologizing under a pseudonym.”

“I apologize under the name of Sen jou ga ha ra Koyomi.”

“Please stop apologizing like a politician. I don’t want such a person to be the future chief of the National Police Agency.”

“Your demands are too high for a husband.”

“Philosophy and thought do warrant contemplation, but let’s think more about the pressing needs of life, Koyomi. Weren’t we supposed to be excitedly discussing our honeymoon destination?”

Right, we were.

Having completed the wedding ceremony, with a god as our witness, and the tedious paperwork, we had finally settled down and arranged a meeting, albeit belatedly, to discuss our long-awaited honeymoon plans.

Although the novel coronavirus could be said to have been eradicated from the earth, given that I currently have a foothold in the FBI and Hitagi is a young leader at the Japanese branch of a foreign firm, we were communicating remotely more often than not. Nevertheless, we both understand the importance of a meaningful face-to-face conversation. After all, it would be impolite not to attend to such a significant matter in person.

Our wedding had narrowly avoided taking place entirely remotely, but fortunately, it was held with only family members present, regardless of any infectious disease-related concerns. It was charming and intimate.

“The only thing I regret is not getting to drag empty cans behind the car; I wanted to try it.”[2]

“Back in the old days, you would’ve tied me to the car and dragged me around the city as a public execution. But a honeymoon, huh?”

To begin with, neither Hitagi nor I were particularly fond of traveling; in fact, we both frequently shuttled across the Pacific Ocean. So, the

word “travel” doesn’t strike a deep chord in me. It’s merely a transfer through different places, and it’s difficult to attribute more significance to it.

I’d much prefer leisurely chats at home like this—without having to specifically go somewhere.

“I agree. Why not take a short trip then? How about the supermarket?”

“That’s too close.”

“But it sounds so super.”

“Well, you have a point. Supermarket is a pretty bold name.”

“But then, if the honeymoon has no significance, we’d better have not had a wedding at all, since it wouldn’t be significant anyway.”

This statement sounds like something the old Hitagi would say—not Araragi Hitagi, but Senjougahara Hitagi.

In fact, many people these days consider weddings to be a grand waste of money, and couples often quarrel during their honeymoon, that’s why “Narita Divorce” gets thrown around as a phrase.[3]

Nowadays, you might also hear “Haneda Divorce” or “Kanku Divorce.”[4]

“Traveling has a way of revealing a couple’s true nature, for better or worse. That’s why I think it’s a necessary ceremony.”

“A ceremony, huh?”

Surprisingly, Oshino was a man who valued such customs.

We can’t take this lightly, then… considering our relationship.

“Speaking of which, that plan to go to Hokkaido to eat crab still hasn’t come to fruition.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to go?”

“It’s tempting to tie up loose ends like a completed achievement, but it might not be the best season for that. I’d rather enjoy the best crab in wintertime anyway, that’s what I really want.”

It's a tough one. Hokkaido, seemingly near but further than Washington D.C., has gradually taken on the nuance of being saved for our enjoyment during our twilight years. However, since we have refrained from indulging up until this point, it is only natural to savor the finest crab in the ideal setting of Hokkaido.

Yet as we speak, the warming of Hokkaido progresses at a steady pace. By the time we reached our retirement years, would it still be a snowy landscape?

"If we were to travel overseas, I think we should consider Europe or Africa. Including South America, both of us travel to the Americans for work often. Or what do you think about crossing the Atlantic Ocean?"

"There is also Oceania. Why not eat crab in Australia? I think you can't climb Ayers Rock anymore… Maybe New Zealand?"

"Apparently the stars there are beautiful. It's famed as a World Heritage of starry skies, they're even working to register it as an actual World Heritage site or something."

A bit vague, but hmm.

Come to it, ever since high school—no, even before that during her sheltered upbringing, Hitagi has had a profound love for the starry skies. An unapologetic adoration.

f I recall, our first date was also at an observatory.

"In that case, what about revisiting that observatory nearby? It's only a few hours' drive."

"Might take a bit longer if we dragged a heap of cans behind."

"We probably shouldn't try that on Japanese roads, you know."

As a cop, I couldn't pardon this.

The idea of revisiting a dating spot from our youth was not a bad one, but Hitagi didn't seem too keen on it, and she exaggeratedly tilted her head—a gesture straight out of the anime.

""What's up. If there are no lodging facilities, we could rent a camper van or something. The state should…"

"There's no need to bring up the state for that. You should be able to rent a car by yourself, right? Anyway, over there, I go pretty often,

usually with my dad and Kanbaru."

"Really?"

During my FBI investigator training, Senjougahara and Kanbaru rekindled their relationship… It's good that she's getting along with her family, which was delicate for a time, but still.

Whether that's how she truly feels or not, at least Hitagi says it's fine with her, but what does her father—and my in-law—think about it?

To have the surname he gave his daughter smeared by some random guy's…

Whoops, gotta stop thinking about it. If I'm not careful, my thoughts get pulled in that direction. The gravity of the issue is too strong.

I'm sure the meaning is just as precious either way, but the name Senjougahara is quite rare. I can't help but contemplate the loss…

"Rather than somewhere you always go, like the supermarket, it should be somewhere special for the ceremony. If it's too familiar, the memories don't stick as strongly. Shouldn't you make memories of going somewhere you've wanted to, like an observatory? Or New Zealand is good, but wasn't there an amazing one in Hawaii or something?"

"Hmm. Electronic telescopes on that scale exceed my realm of expertise. But in the end, it seems we come back to America. Another idea is to go all the way to the Arctic Circle to see the auroras."

"The Arctic. Mm, I wonder if Kagenui-san is doing all right."

She doesn't live at the North Pole year-round of course, but when I hear "Arctic" she's the first thing I think of—her and her shikigami. With that shikigami we could go anywhere in an instant... But the days of merrily living with a corpse doll under the same roof ended quite some time ago. Fraternizing with corpses is strictly forbidden nowadays.

The auroras. Not an uninteresting prospect.

I believe they can be observed either in Canada or the Nordic countries. If given a choice between the two, I would lean towards the latter in this case.

How about Finland, often said to be the closest to Europe? Who

wouldn't want to taste the cinnamon rolls straight from their birthplace? The progress of women's social advancement in the Nordic countries is also noteworthy, and I assume, with a vague image in mind, that there wouldn't be any stipulation requiring spouses to share the same surname.

"Aha!"

And then it struck me.

It struck me like a shooting star.

As I've grown older, my brain has lost its freshness, and such instant inspirations have become all too rare these days. But at this moment, I felt that I had truly been hit by inspiration.

Not merely a shooting star, it could be likened to the brilliance of the Aurora itself.

Too bad about the Finnish licorice, but there was no need to cross the ocean for one. Couldn't there be an equally fantastic location in our very own country for our honeymoon? Although we wouldn't be able to see any auroras for sure, the destination would more than compensate for it. We could call it a return to our roots.

Nay, there's no other way to describe it other than our roots.

"Senjougahara."

"What? Do you still intend to rebel against our nation?"

"No, no, it's actually my love for our country! And our honeymoon destination."

"……"

"Let's go to Senjougahara. According to our class president who knows everything, it's one of Japan's most beautiful marshlands for stargazing."

002

“Senjougahara-san? Is something up with Senjougahara-san?”

“Well, it’s not that something’s up, I’m just curious.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t you think ‘Senjougahara Hitagi’ is a weird and interesting name?”

“…You know, ‘Senjougahara’ is a place name.”

Eighteen years back in time, such a conversation took place within a classroom of Naoetsu Private High School. It would be more accurate to say that it happened nearly six years ago, when I was an eighteen-year-old third-year senior in May. Regardless, it feels like a whole eighteen years have passed.

On that day—the very day I caught my classmate falling gracefully from the staircase above—it all began.

After school, I had thrown such a question at our class president, Hanekawa Tsubasa, who knew everything.

And the response I got was this: a place name.

In other words, there is a place named Senjougahara in Japan, and at that time, in adherence to the good sense one would expect of a narrator who takes pride in promptly cutting out chit-chat that bears no relation to the main storyline, the conversation quickly progressed with utterances such as, “Ah, um, that’s not what I meant. What I was trying to say is, well, it’s about her first name.”

Now, with the passage of time, we shall deliver the director’s cut version. It is not often that a director’s cut version of a film or the like receives rave reviews, but there can be no success without challenge.

“Oh, a surname derived from a place name? That’s the first time I’ve ever heard of it. You know everything!”

“I don’t know everything, I only know what I know.”

Said Hanekawa Tsubasa, casually brushing off the remark during her glasses-wearing days, her hair in three braids—the line itself now rendered nostalgic.

Fast forward six years to the present, and she has vanished not just in name but in existence altogether. To Hanekawa, who had been constantly moving from one family household to another—her parents always somewhere else—names must have seemed more or less inconsequential from the start.

No name was ever permanent, all just transient and fleeting.

Araragi Koyomi at eighteen, just after Golden Week, may have been well aware of this, but he had not yet felt the importance of names.

“Is it like Sekigahara or Dannoura? Or perhaps, like Horagatouge?”

She interjected with an offbeat sense of appreciation.

“Mm, I think Senjougahara’s a bit different from those famous battlegrounds.”

“Really? Where is it, then?”

The young Araragi, who had yet to begin studying for his exams, did not even know the location of Sekigahara, let alone the year of the famous battle that took place there.

“In Tochigi Prefecture.”

“Tochigi?”

Allow me to carefully insert a subtitle here: this conversation took place six years ago—or indeed eighteen—and has been recorded as is to preserve the historical context and culture of that time.

“Where is that? Within the country?”

“Would it be easier if I said Nikko?”

“Nikko…”

When uttered with such a charming smile[5] (which, in human terms, would soon be followed by an encounter in the hallway with a high school girl embodying the epitome of the sarcastic tongue), the malicious air seemed to dissipate. Indeed, the young Araragi understood the reference to Nikko, but when asked where Nikko was, he was still clueless.

In fact, he seemed even more tense.

For young Araragi, who retained his vampiric nature as a consequence of his Spring Break, sunlight was a two-syllable word to be shunned. The memory was still fresh back then.

“Senjougahara is in Oku-Nikko. In the upper left part of Tochigi Prefecture on the map.”

“I remember now. Nikko, ‘If you haven’t seen Nikko, you haven’t seen anything.’”

“Yep, yep.”

Said a seemingly well-accomplished Hanekawa. Reflecting on it now, the honor student had already started to educate me since then, even with our organizing a gathering to decide on a cultural festival performance. Well, it could be considered cultural.

“It’s like seeing Naples before you die. So, what kind of battle took place in that Oku-Nikko? It looks like there’s nothing there.”

I said, eighteen years ago. Furthermore, it was the utterance of a high school student who did not fully know his age. It’s the age when one thinks they’re being sharp by disrespecting a regional city they don’t know well due to lack of information, even though their own address is quite provincial.

Nowadays, such non-compliance is unthinkable.

“No way there’s nothing there. There’s plenty. Lake Chuzenji, Kegon Falls, Futarasan Shrine, Nikko Toshogu Shrine… Nikko Toshogu Shrine is a World Heritage site.”

“Really… aren’t World Heritage sites surprisingly everywhere, though?”

Eighteen years ago, the words were spoken.

Although I am the one bringing it up now.

“There is a designated history that exists everywhere, to be carefully preserved.”

It does hold a profundity.

It’s hard to believe that this was said by a high school junior just like Araragi, eighteen years ago.

However, even if not a World Heritage site, I have definitely heard of Nikko Toshogu Shrine… Wasn't it built by Tokugawa? Or his grandson? I'm not sure, but on this matter, there isn't much difference between the me back then and the me now. If anything, the only distinction is that today, I am aware of the Sleeping Cat, a sculpture by the master Hidari Jingorou, in that World Heritage site.

Cat…

"Futarasan Shrine, it's somewhat like my name, isn't it? And Senjougahara, eh… Is that where you're from?"

"Hmm, who knows?"

Class President evasively rubbed her shoulder, negating the vulgar and probing reiteration of her origins, a habit she maintained consistently since that time.

But at any rate, it is possible that this was her birthplace, as the story I was to hear later from Hanekawa had revealed that she lived in this town since at least junior high school.

"The battle was fought by gods."

"Gods?!"

"The god of Mount Nantai in Tochigi Prefecture and that of Mount Akagi in Gunma Prefecture clashed."

"Tochigi and Gunma? Those two fought?"

Let that be corrected. Even eighteen years ago, this was not an acceptable statement.

"What for?"

"Let me inform you, Araragi-kun, that there were no borders between prefectures at that time. The mountains were equivalent to the gods themselves."

"I have heard that before… So that's why mountains are counted as 'seats,' right? A place for the gods to sit… Then, in that battleground, Hachimanbara, who emerged victorious? Not that it matters."

"Do not say it doesn't matter."

She chastised me, making me feel like I had been scolded by a braided, bespectacled class president from across eighteen years into

the past. It was not an entirely unpleasant feeling; a sci-fi sort of feeling.

Such a figure no longer exists, however.

“From the fact that the battle had reached Hachimanbara in Tochigi Prefecture, it is evident that Gunma Prefecture had the upper hand. It was where the god of Mount Akagi had transformed into a giant centipede and launched an attack.“

“A giant centipede.”

“The battle was met by the god of Mount Nantai in the form of a snake…”

“A snake.”

“But ultimately, it was a man named Saru Maruo[6] who repelled the centipede by shooting its eyes with arrows.”
“Saru, monkey…”

Of course, I don’t possess foresight, so although the snake and monkey may seem to be significant, they could simply be elements of an incredible tale that I cannot grasp entirely.

Undoubtedly, the same could be said for the giant centipede’s role in the story.

It is not hard to connect a centipede biting people with vampirism.

“In summary, the Battlefield Plain of Oku-Nikko is where those two gods clashed, which could explain the seemingly endless marshland that stretches across the horizon without anything to obstruct the view.”

“There’s nothing there, though?”

“It’s not that there’s nothing, your perception just isn’t the sole perspective. For instance, at night, as far as the eye can see…”

Stars fill the sky.

Hanekawa Tsubasa spoke as if it were her catchphrase, yet little did I know that just a month later, I would go on my first date with my first girlfriend at an observatory I knew nothing about.

“I see. That’s neat. Awesome.“

I had little to say other than lightly nodding and agreeing.

“But…”

Then, somewhat deflatedly, I tried to shift our conversation back to the topic.

“Ah, um, that’s not what I meant. What I was trying to say is, well, it’s about her first name.”

003

“Killing Stone?”

“Yes, Killing Stone.”

This was what Kouga Tsuzura, chief of the Naoetsu Hearsay Police Department, said to me when I visited my old workplace to express my gratitude for not only attending my wedding reception, but also for delivering a speech (she had praised someone like me to the skies. Even knowing that it was customary, it still made me happy—Not all old customs are bad practices), and to consult on my future prospects. I had casually mentioned the destination of my honeymoon, and this was her reaction.

“It’s in Tochigi Prefecture. The Killing Stone.”

“That’s a rather ominous, if not terrifying, name for a stone.”

Personally, hearing about a mysterious stone also put me on alert. No, it’s just that during the Spring Break hell and Golden Week nightmare, there was a mini-episode involving a stone.

It was called Koyomi Stone.

“Yeah, pretty scary. It’s said that everything which came near it was falling dead left and right.”

“This isn’t the type of ghost story I often hear in the FBI… I mean, it sounds very Japanese. But what does it have to do with anything?”

“Please go to the stone, Assistant Inspector Araragi.”

“Hey…”

“Ah, or should I call you Federal Agent Araragi now?”

“Assistant Inspector is fine when I’m in Japan. No, that’s not the point, Chief Kouga. I was talking about going on a honeymoon trip. To Tochigi Prefecture.”

“You can get me Utsunomiya ham cutlet as a souvenir.”

“Not gyoza?”

“I’ve tasted food from all around the world with Gaen-senpai, but in the end, I found the Utsunomiya ham cutlet is the best among the whole world’s menus.”

“Really? I agree that Japanese food is delicious, and I’ve become more patriotic since returning, but a ham cutlet? Won’t it get cold?”

“My feelings for Utsunomiya ham cutlets will never cool down. Just bring me the ham, I’ll fry it at home.”

So Chief Kouga cooks for herself. Incidentally, I had heard that Tochigi ham was a local specialty, but I didn’t know anything about it in high school.

“Are you sure you don’t want a stone?”

“I’m not a crocodile. I don’t eat stones. And don’t worry, the tales of the Killing Stone taking lives are just old legends. It goes like this, eight hundred years ago, a stone transformed by a nine-tailed fox named Tamamo-no-Mae emitted a poisonous gas that killed all life around it. It was actually the sulfur in the air that did it.“

“Sulfur? It’s a hot spring area? I thought it was a marshland.”

It was six years ago when I discovered this place. Perhaps within those six ensuing years, hot springs had sprung forth from the marshland?

“Not quite. Tochigi Prefecture is a big place. The Oku-Nikko region where you and your wife are going is far away, on the Nasu Highlands.”

“I’ve heard of the highlands. Famous for their eggplants, right?”

“I wouldn’t say that’s incorrect, but there’s more to it than that.”

“So, are there hot springs?”

“Not just hot springs, but a hot spring shrine as well.”

First time hearing of that.

The opinion of a boss is always important, just as the eggplant flower is never a waste of time.[7]

Though the weary North Shirahebi Shrine was a pretty odd sort, numerous kinds of shrines could be found throughout Japan.

“It’s the parental affection of a superior who wishes for you and your mate[8] to bathe not in negative ions but in the positive smell of sulfur.”

“Wasn’t sulfur, besides being dangerous, known to have an extremely pungent smell? And even if we were to acknowledge that rumor, the only reason for living things falling left and right was non-supernatural. And why are you calling her my mate instead of wife?“

”When you went overseas to attend training, police compliance training became more stringent. Saying ‘your madam’ could result in dismissal, even the power of Gaen-senpai could not save me.”

“Uh, just ‘wife’?”

“’Wife’ is allowed for now, but ‘consort’ is out.”

“‘Consort’ should be out regardless of the era. I’m not one to talk since I was called piglet.”[9]

“Oh, did the Araragi couple really call you that?”

“You can never know what really goes on in a household. Even a seemingly perfect couple can be abusing their child. But for now, it’s fine to call her my wife, but taking her to a place that reeks of sulfur sounds a bit…”

“The hot spring trip is a classic. Even Sakamoto Ryoma must have gone on one.”

Sakamoto Ryoma? Oh, was he the great man who first went on a honeymoon in Japan? Although as a police officer, I can’t help but think of him in a different light, given that he carried a revolver. I’m not familiar with the details, did he visit Katsurahama?

“No, Sakamoto Ryoma and Katsurahama don’t seem to have anything to do with each other.”

“No? There’s an imposing stone statue there.”

“That’s not a statue, it’s a bronze figure.“

And we were talking about a stone, not a statue.

The Killing Stone.

The name really was ominous, but fear makes the wolf bigger than he is—it remains dangerous, but the rumor has been explained away. And it would be out of our jurisdiction regardless.

“The jurisdiction of the Hearsay Department encompasses the entire Earth. The fact that we sent you on overseas training is part of that, the wind blows from anywhere and the air is all connected.”

Which is why strange smells waft through the air as well, Chief Kouga said—it made sense.

There was no such thing as jurisdiction in the world of aberrations.

Crossing fields and mountains, even borders and oceans, a vampire had come to this town.

And no matter how much we called it a journey to trace our roots, visiting only Senjougahara for a honeymoon was one bullet tour—we could make a day trip if we wanted to.

”Not that I intended to challenge the newlywed journey’s RTA.”

“I was thinking of visiting various famous spots in Tochigi since I was here, putting aside the Killing Stone for now. I heard about Nasu Highlands from a rumor. It’d be a good course, I think.”

“Right, right. I recommend it. Thanks to the positive and negative effects of the Corona crisis, glamping has become firmly established.”

“Glamping—you mean that glamorous camping-like thing?”

“Yeah. Barbecue and stuff.”

Could I, who had such a high school life, be so entertained with barbecue on my honeymoon? I would like to tell this to myself from eighteen years ago.

Was it six years ago?

Well, maybe me from six May’s ago might have despised adult me for lowering myself to the point of barbecuing at camp.

He may risk the time paradox by decisively taking action.

“There are plenty of great camping sites in Nasu Highlands, Assistant Inspector Araragi.”

“Should I go take a look at the Killing Stone while I'm enjoying glamping? Just to confirm the resolved rumor—I mean, for future reference?”

“Even in an area with so many ranches, it's not all that idyllic. I do

want you, who has a promising future, to gain more and more career experience. Although it was none other than me who was trained by Gaen-san in that way, knowing the field is surprisingly important... By the way, that Killing Stone, it just cracked open."

"Cracked open?"

Like, with a *ker-thwack*?

A sound effect out of the tale of Momotaro?

"W-When? Why did it happen?"

"As for when, it was last year."

So really recent. Furthermore, considering its origin as the Nine-Tailed Fox, said to have occurred eight hundred years ago, it becomes even more astounding. Eight hundred years ago. When you think about it, it was older than Shinobu.

"As for why, it's attributed to weathering. The stone itself became fragile and susceptible to damage from the sulfur emitted in its surroundings, and it cracked under its own weight. That's essentially the prevailing theory."

However, this rumor is different, Chief Kouga said, rectifying her posture.

"Naturally, it may seem the nine-tailed fox has come back to life."

"……"

"It's our role to nimbly crush such rumors before they materialize in distorted forms. Unfortunately, Tochigi Prefecture Police still hasn't set up a Hearsay Department. We were planning a business trip though, and when you returned home temporarily for your wedding and mentioned that you would visit the area on your honeymoon, it was truly an act of divine providence."

"That feels like an Okinawan greeting."

Speaking as an overseas trainee, attaching work to a honeymoon would make one think that 'the Japanese workstyle' needs to be reformed, or rather, that a change in mindset is absolutely necessary. But I have sworn to God that I would never denigrate my country from an American, European, or FBI point of view.[10] I might as well swear to the god of Mount Nantai. If he's a god of snakes, he probably

dislikes me.

“There’s also a Snake Stone near the Killing Stone, called the Blind Snake Stone. The origin of this is completely different from the Killing Stone, but—well, let’s not spoil it. See it for yourself. When you go and see it, it won’t even be that significant of a Killing Stone.”

“I understand. So, what you want is for me, who is considered the hope of the Hearsay Department, to go and see that broken stone and judge that ‘nothing happened.’”

Maybe it could be called fact, or maybe the fait accompli. A de facto marriage, though completely different.

One could call it a proven record, in this particular case.

“That’s the job of the Hearsay Department, isn’t it?”

“Not just limited to the Hearsay Department, most police work is like that. A report that says ‘nothing happened’ is the most important and the most peaceful.”

Indeed, no truer words have been spoken. It’s better if incidents don’t happen at all. That was keenly felt in America, the home of urban legends. Rumors were better if they don’t flow. There was nothing better than a state of no wind. However.

“Chief Kouga, can I ask you a question…?”

“What is it? We’re close, aren't we? Feel free to ask me anything, Assistant Inspector Araragi.”

“Suppose, just suppose…”

“Let's just say that as a proud bachelorette, I'm not in a position to give you that kind of advice.”

“It’s not about home life, no. Imagine if, during my honeymoon or glamping trip, I were to visit the Killing Stone… and seek the specialist opinion.”

In this case, the word “specialist” refers to the remnant of the vampire who had taken up residence in my very own shadow. Although one might argue that I, as a professional, should rely on my own judgment, it had actually been quite some time since I last exercised my vampiric abilities. My reckless high school years have, by now, receded into the distant past; or at least, they were farther away than

Tochigi Prefecture.

“If nothing happens, that would be best. But what if something does happen, and it’s already too late?”

“Wait, whatever do you mean?”

“Now you’re playing dumb, Chief Kouga. Placing an interjection at the beginning of a quote makes it seem like you genuinely don’t know what I’m talking about. I am asking how we should handle the situation if Tamamo-no-Mae, the nine-tailed fox, who has lived longer than any vampire, were to really revive.”

Although my knowledge of Tamamo-no-Mae was hazy and foggy at best, wasn’t she the demon who supposedly came to Japan just to bring about its destruction? I wasn’t aware that she had once disguised herself as the Killing Stone.

If that stone were to crack, ah, I wouldn’t be surprised if something burst forth from it, based on my experience.

“Then, Assistant Police Inspector Araragi, or perhaps Federal Agent Araragi,” remarked Chief Kouga with a decisive tone. In the tone of a superior officer, she continued, “In accordance with the loyalty you have sworn to your country, you shall fulfill your mission.”

“But ma’am, I’m not a soldier, neither in Japan nor in America.”

A grown adult at the age of twenty-four, engaging in battles? What a ruthless way of life.

004

On our honeymoon trip, Kanbaru Suruga accompanied us as well.

Why, you may ask?

Before I could even raise the question, my wife—Araragi Hitagi—had already factored her in as a member of the trip, as if she were another character among the list of suspects in a mystery novel.

By the time I had carefully planned the three-day, two-night itinerary, including destinations within Tochigi Prefecture, and even woven in some glamping in Nasu Highlands—she had nonchalantly changed the lineup to make it so.

It was a decided matter.

Hitagi-san, who famously had her own father tag along on our first date, has transcended six years of time and changed her family name, but it seems her mental resolve remains unyielding.

“Well, I did say earlier that I often go to the observatory, but I haven’t been able to hang out with Kanbaru much lately. Despite finally getting to work in Japan, I’ve been swamped with settling into the Japanese branch, and Kanbaru has her studies to focus on… Even I couldn’t help her with the grueling exam preparations to become a doctor, so all I could do was watch over her from afar.”

“Oh, right, Kanbaru is aiming to become a sports doctor, isn’t she? That’s why she enrolled in the medical school of a physical education university.”

Compared to me, who struggled with entrance exam studies just to attend the same university as her, the motivation behind her ambitions was worlds apart. Speaking of which, what happened with that? Being abroad, I’ve been oblivious to any news. It would’ve been nice to ask her during the wedding (Kanbaru served as Hitagi’s bridesmaid, even though it was a traditional Japanese wedding).

“Now she’s in her fifth year, and since it’s medical school, she won’t graduate until the year after next. But she does have various

internships and such."

"Seems like everyone's constantly doing internships when they're young."

"While she continues to pursue her dream of becoming the sports doctor for the professional basketball team she had always hoped for, it seems the team itself is looking for someone with experience. The fact that she participated in the Inter-High in high school wasn't all in vain. To become a sports doctor, she'll need to work for more than four years after obtaining her medical license, so the road ahead may be long. That being said, if she pushes herself just a tad, she'll be able to join our honeymoon trip without a hitch."

"It sounds great, but it's like our gears don't fit together. Who's spinning their wheels here—me, or you? I think uou're pushing it a little too hard. Regardless of our plans, it feels like it was a given that Kanbaru would join us on our honeymoon."

"What's wrong with that? It's like an American family sitcom. I'm even considering the possibility of sharing a house with Kanbaru."

"Even though *we* aren't living together?"

"There's a lot to catch up on. Koyomi, don't let your old, outstanding junior becoming a renowned future doctor shake you up; celebrate her accomplishment properly."

I feel like this wouldn't exactly qualify as a honeymoon anymore, but more like Kanbaru's consolation trip… No, it's not that I don't want to celebrate her new beginning. On the contrary, I'm filled with the desire to celebrate.

Isn't the honeymoon, which originated with Sakamoto Ryouma, fundamentally something that a married couple goes on alone?

"What's this? You're the type to brazenly challenge the notion of married couples having the same surname, and yet you're so quick to grovel before such a trivial bit of common knowledge?"

"Well, when you put it that way, it does sound pretty weak…"

"Rather than going on two trips, wouldn't it be nice to wrap it up in one go?"

"You're just trying to save yourself the hassle. Both the honeymoon and the consolation trip?"

“Oh no, actually, I’m quite satisfied with the interesting plan of taking Senjougahara to Senjougahara. Not a hassle at all. I just want to let my dear junior participate in this fun experience too.”

When bundled together as a cute and amusing plan, the nuance of the two-night, three-day trip changes a bit—but if they’re up for it, I would be happy too.

Such a production, which would culminate in taking away Hitagi’s name, is the most painful and the one thing I must not do, as it would leave me with nothing but self-indulgence.

“I knew that Senjougahara was in Tochigi Prefecture, but it’s my first time going there, and I didn’t even know that the stars were so beautiful. Having lived as a Senjougahara for nearly a quarter of a century, I consider this a life-long mistake and a loss I wish to recover as soon as possible. So, I’m in quite the high spirits. Even as she is, Hanekawa-san will still help us, won’t she?”

“She’s like… a genuine revolutionary, you know?”

Her style is different, as are her principles.

“If only we could get in touch with her, I would have loved to invite Hanekawa-san to the Haney-moon, as well.”

“Are you trying to be witty?”

That Hanekawa was no longer the Hanekawa we once knew.

Again, all records of her were erased two years ago.

Now she existed only in our memories.

“That said, if we count the participants, we can’t overlook the fact that even you aren’t alone. Wouldn’t it be nice to travel with one companion each?”

Oh, she found the blind spot before the blind snake stone was found.

If you’re asking why, it’s because my shadow-dwelling companion, Oshino Shinobu, formerly known as Heart-Under-Blade, would inevitably accompany me on my trip to Tochigi Prefecture. So closely intertwined were we that the realization eluded both Shinobu and me.

If Shinobu was to me what Kanbaru was to Hitagi, then there could be no objection.

Besides, it would be easier to fight at any time.

Because a fight to the death may await us at our honeymoon destination with a nine-tailed fox scheming to destroy Japan.

A doctor plus a vampire.

Healers and fighters… more indispensable than even a thermos or a smartphone.

005

Now stationed in Washington, D.C., I, Araragi Koyomi, naturally don't have a home of my own in Japan. So, whenever I return to the country, I find myself going back to my parents' house. Of course, I have the option of staying at Hitagi's place—in fact, since we are married and have registered our marriage (a rather quaint expression, perhaps "in the same registry" is more appropriate), one might think it only natural to do so. However, Hitagi, herself, at the age of twenty four, still resides in her childhood home.

In other words, she still lives with her parents. With her father. The two of them.

She lived in a dormitory during university, and afterwards, when she found a job in America, she did have her own place there. However, ever since she returned to Japan to help establish a branch of her firm, she had not sought to move out and embark on a real estate hunt again.

I want to build a good relationship with her father, and reminiscing about the days when Hitagi and I became close, Tamikurasou did hold a sense of nostalgia, too. But I can't just barge in there and spend the night.

It must be attachment.

Maybe clinging to old customs.

Before our honeymoon, we should have decided on a new home first of all, but in the end, after finishing this trip I have to return to Washington and continue my endless FBI training—though I boast about it, in reality I'm just a rookie recruit in the elite organization, a bottom-rung newbie, in other words, my usual position. And considering Hitagi's career and status, it's not so simple for her to leave Japan either.

Even married, it was a long-distance love.

That's why this marriage, this formality, was necessary—no matter how modern the times, Senjougahara Hitagi had to become Araragi

Hitagi. Or maybe I should have become Senjougahara Koyomi.

Well, I can spout some reasonable-sounding arguments, but the truth is that neither Hitagi nor I can leave home yet—we still have that can't-leave-the-parents mentality.

When it comes to Hitagi, ever since she was in high school she's been from a single-parent family. She went through rebellious and daddy's-girl phases, so she probably has a more complicated mix of feelings. She might not be able to leave her father alone—the fact that she didn't insist on bringing him along on her honeymoon shows she's grown, I suppose.

It's a sign she's becoming more independent from her parents.

Since I'd rather avoid another family collapse, I cannot but proceed cautiously about building a new family with someone like her. I hope this honeymoon will be a good start for us.

Huh? Us?

The Araragi family?

Well, no, as Chief Kouga mentioned, my parents, the Araragi couple—the *other* Araragi couple—now often go to the capital on business trips, more often than when I was in high school. I also said that I was returning to my parents' home after coming back from my trip, but my parents were not there now.

Currently, my sister, Araragi Karen—a police officer of the Naoetsu Community Safety Police Department—is protecting the Araragi household, living alone in a single-family home. So, when I return to the country like this, it seems like I'm being supported by my sister—a far cry from the ideal future envisioned by high schooler Araragi.

"Nii-chan! The food is ready—eat up! Oh, I've also prepared the bath, so you can go in whenever you like."

"…You've grown into one fine adult, haven't you?"

I wonder why my high school self underestimated my sister during her junior high days. Thinking about it now, there was no other way to describe it than unjust. Should the world be different, I'd want to commit seppuku to apologize.

Let me proudly say that while I was away from Japan working a menial job in Washington, she, who still keeps growing in height and

possesses an unusually large stature for a Japanese person, shockingly became the top-ranked police judoka in Japan.

The top in Japan, you say?

How on Earth did that happen?

You may have forgotten her initial characterization, in fact, she was originally a karate practitioner, not judo.

“I may be the top in Japan, nii-chan, but it’s separate for men and women, and there are weight classes in judo. So even if I’m praised, I wasn’t particularly satisfied. That’s why I’ve switched my required course to kendo now.”

“You’re always trying to break new ground.…”

I seriously worried about what kind of adult the girl who was aiming to be the strongest in the world as the Fire Sisters, would become, but now that it’s come to this, I see those worries were unfounded.

She’s totally becoming the strongest.

And she’s protecting our home all by herself.

“I used to think that fighting with weapons didn’t suit me, but when I tried, I found swords to be quite appealing. They have a profound depth to them. Well, my aesthetics of bare-handed combat already collapsed a long time ago when I carried a gun during my uniformed officer days.”

“You were good in shooting training too, weren’t you?”

“I owe that entirely to my eyesight.”

As spoken by an expert.

I must say, living in the gun-infested society of America, filled with daily trepidation, can be quite a struggle. Regardless of whether the bullets are made of silver or not, guns are fearsome.

As a novice, I wasn’t familiar with pistols. I had even skimped on shooting practice as well as judo and kendo training.

My stance resembled that of Lieutenant Columbo.

A far cry from being a good cop on Hanekawa’s level.

Those high school days spent reveling in battles now seemed like a distant past. I can't disclose the concealed details of the Hearsay Department's operations, but shouldn't I bring her along on the honeymoon?

With mighty fists capable of banishing even aberrations, there's no knowing the extent of the damage she might cause.

Bringing my sister along might erase the newlywed atmosphere of the honeymoon, but there was a time when we didn't get along. Now, I was truly proud to call her my sister.

I'd like to go on a brother-sister trip one of these days, just the two of us.

My precious only sister.

Huh? Weren't there two sisters in the Araragi family? I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. In a different way than Hanekawa, I really don't know anything about my sister, her whereabouts and doings are a mystery.

She even went as far as to skip my wedding.

The youngest child, true to our worries, had grown into an impressive adult. I thought I too was leading a fairly unconventional life, but compared to her, mine was a life lived on the rails. The existence of this freely spirited sibling alone could jeopardize not only my and Karen's careers as public servants but also our parents'.

"Honestly, could she throw away the Araragi name, just her?"

"Don't think like that, Nii-chan. You have a lovely sister, y'know?"

Yes, I might have said too much.

I hope she takes it as affectionate harsh words.

Rather, speaking honestly from the life I had spent deeply immersed in the common sense of society, enough to steal the beloved name of my lover, I was almost enviously captivated by the freedom to be able to not attend if it was far away or too troublesome even if it was a relative's wedding.

And when it comes to it, I might simply break into tears when she—or Karen—marries someone wonderful, but separately from that, I might have complex feelings about the fact that their last names will change.

Araragi Karen and Araragi Tsukihi will vanish. Karen especially was currently defending the family of Araragi on her own.

Despite being the most suited for the Araragi name.

“What are we to do, I wonder? If you two were to get married, perhaps I could then adopt you as my children?”

“Now that’s a crazy idea that brings me back to high school. Instead of that, why not think about how you can enjoy your honeymoon starting tomorrow?”

“I can’t help but smile thinking about it. Might be a good idea, though.”

“Silly nii-chan, you can think for half a day and still not come up with anything.”[11]

“Hehe.”

“Don’t smirk like that.”

Hmmm. Adoption.

“On the eve of my honeymoon, I just feel like having a long overdue heart-to-heart conversation with my little sister. I never thought I’d spend such peaceful times with you. I feel like drinking some alcohol even.”

“I’m a martial artist, you know, I don’t drink.”

A commendable stance.

Actually, I don’t drink much either… and Hitagi had been moderate since her student days. It wasn’t so much that her physical condition wasn’t great, but more that she disliked losing her rationality due to alcohol. This is how she lived her life, exercising self-discipline at all times.

How would Kanbaru fare, I wonder? Knowing her in high school, I’m inclined to think she’d be averse to losing her rationality.

“I gotta prepare myself for the trip. By the way, Karen, before you started working, you used to go solo camping all over Japan, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. It was more like mountain hermitages.”

I was really grateful that she'd grown up so well. The workings of fate were truly intricate.

"Since we'll be doing that on our honeymoon—not a mountain retreat, camping—do you have any tips for someone inexperienced?"

"Don't fight with bears."

"Advice more suited for beginners, please."

"That was advice for beginners. I fought one and learned the hard way."

My younger sister has grown up so well, but her teenage years were quite wild. There is no denying our shared blood. Perhaps Tsukihi is experiencing an extended teenage phase in that sense. She's like a phoenix, after all.

"Besides mountain retreats, I haven't done any glamping-like stuff. In terms of procuring food on-site, it might be similar to a mountain retreat, though."

"No, we're not going hunting or anything like that."

Maybe the term "locally procured" could be used to describe glamping, but in any case, it was an experience that could be enjoyed without worry, even if you showed up empty-handed; there was no need for survival skills—or so I was led to believe. The "lam" in glamping doesn't refer to the game you hunt.

"What about the tent? How will you do it?"

"I'm sure it'll be prepared in advance. It's more like a shelter than a tent, really."

I wanted advice, but instead found myself explaining what I had gleaned from guidebooks—an admittedly superficial understanding. It's not even enough to say I've merely nibbled on it.

"I see. That sounds similar to a mountain retreat, I guess. When I went on one, I had to start by finding a cave."

"Please don't compare it to a natural shelter. It's seriously amazing that you're still alive."

"It's because of that experience that I'm here today. I underwent the same kind of training in the police academy after finding a job. Like, a trek through the mountains."

“Are you in the Special Forces or something?”

My department is considered special too, but you’re actually in the SAT?

I’m not sure I need this kind of training. Despite being a low-level member of the FBI, I was still a suit-wearer. Young Araragi really was too lax, it seems.

Hearing such a tough story made me think that there was no particular need to be overly nervous about my first camping. It was just due to it being something new that I worried excessively, I suppose. I couldn’t help but have the strong desire not to fail.

“I haven’t even camped as a college student. It might be my first overnight trip ever.”

“Nii-chan, we used to go on overnight trips all the time, just like Tsukihi-chan does now.”

Was that so?

Well, yes, I guess it was. For example, during my hellish Spring Break I spent about two weeks in the ruins of a cram school, and in university, I had even spent some time with Ononoki-chan in an ancient castle of Europe.

If living in ruins was taken into account as glamping, it’s not like I hadn’t been on an overnight trip. I’d even been to hell, although that was a day-trip.

A day-trip to hell.

It’s a wonder I made it back at all.

“I see. Thinking about it that way, there’s no reason to be nervous. For something so unlike me, I ended up doing thorough research and preparations for the trip.”

“Nii-chan, it’s about time you fix your tendency to dive headfirst into things without thinking,” my sister admonished.

“But the reason you’re nervous isn’t because it’s glamping or an overnight trip, it’s because it’s your first time traveling with Senjougahara-san, right?” she asked, hitting the nail on the head.

Is this an interrogation?

“Ah, sorry, not Senjougahara-san, I meant Mrs. Araragi.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Like in the manga Oishinbo.

Actually, in that manga, when Kurita and Yamaoka got married, they discussed having separate surnames. Terrifyingly, the times have not advanced a single step since then.

“You’re also Araragi, you know?”

“Should I call her Hitagi? It’d feel like I’m suddenly closing the distance, though. How about Hitagi sister-in-law?”

Hmmm. Karen has also become my lawful sister, huh.

“Since we’re family now, I think that’s fine. When I’m away from Japan, if something happens, I want you to rely on her.”

Conversely, if something were to happen to Hitagi, I’d certainly want Karen to be there as a police officer and as a sister-in-law, and lend her strength.

“Yep, leave it to me, Nii-chan. I too, intend to entrust my precious assets in the hands of my beloved sister-in-law Hitagi.”

“Still, keep your finances separate from your relatives.”

For a harmonious relationship such as ours, I don’t want to tarnish it with petty disputes, especially when it comes to money matters. Plus, Hitagi is already grappling with an inner conflict, as she has had a troubled past involving a despicable conman, and has since taken up a profession similarly deceptive in nature.

It was, in fact, with the intention of capturing such deceitful characters that I became a police officer. Since this is not a suspense drama, I would never wish to arrest my own wife. In such a case, it would be preferable to maintain a vigilant watch over any rumors that may arise, even on our honeymoon. Since the spread of such falsehoods was, after all, akin to fraud.

“Being a police officer’s wife, I assume sister-in-law Hitagi has been thoroughly investigated, hasn’t she?”

“Investigated? Considering her violence in high school… Does such an investigation even take place on a practical level?”

“It’s rather suspicious that you and I could become police officers at all.”

The fact that she was able to become Japan's number one police judoka could be testament to her exceptional abilities. As for me, one cannot deny the possibility of family connections playing a role.

On the flip side, if Hitagi—the stationery fanatic—became the wife of a police officer, it might not be an issue, as both Karen and I have been able to slip through the investigation net so far. When I reported our marriage to Chief Kouga, no particular objections were raised. Considering her position as Hearsay Department Chief and her profile as Gaen-san's confidant, there's no way she wouldn't know about Hitagi's past as Senjougahara Hitagi, when she was involved with the crab.

"Maybe it's the times, but we can't just deny someone the right to marry, not even bad guys. At most, they're sent to the super sideline police department."

"Which department is that…?"

It might just be the Hearsay Department.

Being by the window, it seemed to have good ventilation for rumors.

"Well, I for one have been practically banished abroad."

Speaking of which, it's true that I have been on a series of constant overnight trips—or rather, I have had a wealth of experience in regularly going missing. However, neither during my time at Naoetsu Private High School nor at Manase National University did I ever go on an overnight trip with Hitagi, neither camping or staying at a hotel.

Be it domestic or overseas, my traveling companions were always little girls, juvenile girls, or adolescent girls.

Looking back, it's astonishing that I became a police officer.

"Ah, so that's it. I guess honeymoons had such aspects to them even in Sakamoto Ryoma's time. I don't think it's like that at all now, but it's like the first time traveling with a partner you'll spend your lifetime with."

"And people say that travel reveals a person's character. Could also be an opportunity to get to know each other better. I've also come to know bears through our head-on clashes."

"That conversation was something I could totally agree with, until you

turned it into a mountain hermitage story. Actually, it's more like something out of the folktales about Kintarou."

While mountain hermitages may be stories of solo journeys, Karate expert Karen, considering her extensive experience in training camps, may be worth listening to when it came to revealing one's humanity. It may be a matter of humaneness too.

"I'm glad to see that someone who would venture overseas without a passport and engage in on-the-spot duels has begun to prepare so carefully for his trips, but why worry so much? Even if you get into a fight, the bond between you and Hitagi sister-in-law won't be broken that easily."

It could be said that we had been together for nearly ten years—and indeed, that's true. However, counting from my high school days, the person I had shared this decade-long connection with was Senjougahara Hitagi, not Araragi Hitagi.

Fear not any misunderstanding: although it may be hard to avoid such, no matter how much care is taken, it felt as if I was rebuilding my relationship with Hitagi from scratch. And maybe, this was the difference between a romantic relationship and a marital one. If I were told that was the legal distinction, I'd have to concede it made sense.

Just as my relationships with Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade and with Oshino Shinobu are not only different, but polar opposites even.

"A sense of unity that a family has when they share the same surname? I find it hard to believe that this could be the case, with how scattered we are."

"The Araragi family may be almost separated, but Nii-chan, don't you think it's because of our minimal sense of unity that we can barely stay connected?"

That might be true. Particularly from the perspective of those who were separated.

However, I had never thought about it until I found myself in such a position, but if that sense of unity—or something like it—was born from my mother changing her surname in the first place, then I, the oldest son, was entirely too unconcerned with that historical fact.

It was obvious, but from the time I became aware of my surroundings,

my mother had always been surnamed Araragi—Although I knew as knowledge that she had belonged to a different family name before marriage, I hadn't really thought about it, at least not consciously. There must have been a different sense of unity before that.

And on getting married, she was torn away from that unity.

In a way, didn't that mean we hadn't acknowledged her individuality and personality prior to being our mother? It felt like we were ignoring who she was before, after all.

"Ah, well, I guess I gotta go then, to Senjougahara."

"I think meeting a kindred spirit as your partner makes you the luckiest guy in all of Japan, Nii-chan."

“Nine-tailed fox? I know not.”

This indifferent reply came when I asked the young blonde girl, who emerged leisurely from my shadow, about the Killing Stone that had become my mission during a long-overdue honeymoon. Having finished a meal with my sister, taking separate baths, and finally settling down in my room—more accurately, a room that showed traces of once being occupied by the young boy Araragi—I couldn’t help prying.

“I don’t know everything, I know only donuts.”

“Wow, that’s funny.”

“I do know the Cat of Many Tails, though—it is the classic by Ellery Queen.”

After more than a decade of reading nothing but manga, this young girl had finally grown up to read classical mystery novels.

Little girls do grow up, huh.

No, had she truly grown up, not just Japan, but the entire world would be in peril—this is something one tends to forget inadvertently. It is because she remains in this childish form that she is granted the certification of harmlessness.

“Speaking of aberrations, you were once the king of them, and Oshino, being a specialist, should’ve given you some special education. Even I’ve heard of Tamamo-no-Mae’s name.”

“Ah, the name.”

“Somehow, it sounds fake,” said Shinobu as she tilted her head.

She tilted her hands and feet as well—a stretch, it looked like, due to her constant presence in my shadow.

“My history as the king of aberrations, and the nostalgic aloha boy’s expert instruction, it has been almost eighteen years—or has it been

six? I have forgotten all about it."

I wanted to say how unconvincing that sounded, but it might just be the way it is—I hardly remember even a grain of the knowledge I crammed during my entrance exam studies.

It was forgotten on a nanoparticle level.

I wasn't even sure what I learned in college. I couldn't even be sure if I really took the exams. Did I get in on my parents' connections, so very like me?

Including my numerous brushes with death, memories related to aberrations seemed to be deeply etched in my mind, but in reality, these experiences may be romanticized or altered.

Hellish spring breaks, nightmarish Golden Weeks, stylish and elegant battles against vampires and cats alongside Hanekawa, uttering superb catchphrases—do these memories reflect the truth?

"Why don't you do that thing you do? That memory technique where you stick your hand into your brain and stir it up chaotically."

I remember it with crystalline clarity, like a trauma.

"Are you a fool? If I, now merely a squeezed-out husk, were to attempt such a violent technique, only the gruesome corpse of a young girl would appear in your room."

"That'd be awful for sure. I'd have to wield the full might of a cop to cover it up."

"You should not be a cop by any means. Neither a cop nor an FBI agent."

"Hmph. That's why I became a famous detective instead."

"That certainly sounds like a line from a classical mystery."

I don't think so.

Why classical specifically, anyway?

"Right. It was a technique from your vampire days, more or less. I guess you wouldn't have memorized it."

"Indeed, if I were to stir my brain like that, it would turn into a Tochigi specialty, Shimotsukare."

“How are you so knowledgeable about Tochigi’s specialties?”

“I had a period where I lived in this country, as a god.”

That’s right. I often forget that.

Rather than living here, it’s better to say that she reigned over here.

Could it be that this little girl witnessed the battle of Tochigi and Gunma at the Senjougahara, or rather, the fight between god and god, the clash of the giant centipede and snake?

Had she been watching from a vantage point engulfed in sand?

“The timing does not add up. My time as a god in Japan—that is to say, on this land, happened about four hundred years ago. The myth you are referring to may be slightly older.”

“Well, I guess.”

It wasn’t just a slight difference, but that was the scale of human beings.

Wasn’t Tamamo-no-Mae eight hundred years ago? The scale was completely different for great supernatural beings and gods.

So there hadn’t once been a connection or destiny between Shinobu and Tamamo-no-Mae in this country.

“So you weren’t childhood friends like me and Oikura.”

“Indeed. You have no childhood friends.”

“I do. Don’t forget about Oikura.”

“I merely denied the ‘friends’ part. Although, I cannot deny my tendency to forget things. The times when I was pretending to slay aberrations are now beyond the realm of forgetfulness. Fox aberration, hm.”

”They are often mentioned alongside tanuki, but is that all there is to them?“

Foxes are indeed a common presence in ghost stories, yet their image is generally quite playful and not especially threatening.

A fox of the size and power to destroy a country, however, would be far beyond the reach of our abilities today.

Whether in Japan or America, my accomplishments extended no further than that of a humble investigator.

As I consider this, I must admit that even current Shinobu is hardly formidable battle personnel; she'd be better described as an entertainer, mascot even. Should the rumor prove true, even with the directive from Chief Kouga, to whom I had sworn allegiance, I feared we would have no choice but to flee in terror, our tails between our legs.

"I'd cut off my own tailbone just to get away."

"Though my resolve is strong, the scene before us is indeed a harrowing one. I may not know of the Killing Stone, but I have heard rumors of stones splitting apart all over the place."

"Oh, so there are other legends like it after all. I wonder if they branched off, or if they were once all one story. History really is fascinating when it's not part of a school curriculum."

"Even the dumpling statue at Utsunomiya Station was reportedly split in half, with its sealed juices spilling out."

"That's recent, isn't it?"

That makes me wonder why she was so familiar with Tochigi Prefecture.

If she was, then she should know about Tamamo-no-Mae as well.

Falling behind the times, are you?

"If it is the ancient knowledge you seek, let your wish be fulfilled—in all seriousness, it is a good place to take the tsundere girl."

"Not because the Senjougahara battlefield is there?"

"I think there was a tradition called the 'Festival of Rowdiness,' a bizarre celebration where people march while hurling insults. It would be perfect for somebody with her sharp-tongue."

"I wish I could have told high school Hitagi about this."

Now that she had matured, entered society, and found work, Hitagi's sharp tongue had been considerably subdued. She could no longer become a sarcastic news reporter. Nevertheless, in the sense of recalling the good old days, it was a festival with enough impact that I'd like to visit if I can.

“Where is it?”

“In Ashikaga City.”

“Are you pulling some ancient wisdom from your brain, or did you just read a guidebook?”

Maybe it wasn’t impossible that she was more looking forward to our honeymoon than I was.

On further thought, she had been constantly bound to my shadow, denied the freedom to move on her own. She, who used to be a wandering princess, traveling all over the world.

“I can hardly remember my time as an unmoored princess. I was traumatized by the forced travel. However, you took me to live in America for over a year. It’s a fact that I have grown to miss Japanese food.”

“Weren’t you originally from Europe?”

“Shimotsukare may vary in taste, but I’m interested in trying Nasuben.”

“Nasuben?”

It was quite puzzling that I was continually receiving local Nasu information when I summoned Shinobu to investigate a mystery as a request of the Hearsay Department.

Despite all that, the trip was unavoidably intriguing; at its core, it was still a honeymoon.

To make amends for the name taken from my lover, I wanted to make it as good of a trip as possible.

“Ah, the nine-tailed fox is not entirely unrelated to Nasuben. It is an abbreviation of ‘Nasu no Makunouchi Bento.’ Although called a bento, it is more like a set meal; following the likeness of the nine-tailed fox, served in nine dishes.”

“Hmm, I guess the fox is deeply rooted in the local culture, unbeknownst to an ignorant person like me. I wonder what the fox dance is all about.”

“That is from Hokkaido.”

So it is.

In contrast to Shinobu, I had become quite unfamiliar with Japanese affairs. Even so, I couldn't say that I had become well versed in Washington either. The most I had seen was the obelisk.

There was a sense of instability, as if I was losing touch with my roots. Nonetheless, it was not as destabilizing as losing my name.

…I should tell her about that, too.

It was an unavoidable topic when discussing our honeymoon to Senjougahara.

"Shinobu."

"What is it?"

"Well, I wasn't sure whether to call you Shinobu or not… since I took your name. I thought that we should take this chance to delve deeper into that matter and discuss it properly."

"It is a tad too late to be digging up something you have been glossing over with vague words. Although, I did overhear you talking about it with the tsundere girl."

"Now that I'm an adult, I feel that I must face the reality that I have avoided and establish a new ethical standpoint. First and foremost, the matter of when I saved you as you were on the verge of death after being torn limb from limb."

"Is this book going to end with only that story?"

With a meta remark like that, Shinobu had swiftly cut off the conversation—indeed an impressive skill that could only have been honed over six hundred years. She tried to deal with my serious talk by turning it into a gag.

"I'll cut it out and move on, but, it might have been necessary to neutralize you. Taking away your power may have been, but I can't help but think, looking back on it now, that taking away your name was a bit too much."

"Aha. Well, in the sense of the supernatural, taking away one's name and one's power is almost equivalent—I must say that even the name Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade was given to me for that very reason."

"Ah, yeah—by Death."

“Don’t you dare call her Death.”

Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide Master—the purebred vampire who transformed the wandering princess Shinobu into a vampire.

Now deceased.

When I was in university, Shinobu and I journeyed to Europe—almost as if stowing away—to witness the passing of that purebred vampire. I must mention that this was a tale from before I became a cop.

“I see, that’s how it came to be. Before that, what was it again? When you were a wandering princess—a noble princess?”

“It was Princess Acerola.”

“Princess Acerola.”

“Do not ridicule my former name.”

“I’m not ridiculing it.”

“Before that, it was Lola. Yes, Lola.”

“You’re trying to make me laugh, aren’t you? The way you say it.”

“It was Road Roller.”

“Ah, there’s no escape.”

She was trying to make me sound insensitive. What a wicked little girl. There’s no way she was Lola.

“But that’s the hard part. I wonder if you became a wicked little girl because you ceased to be Lola, or if you ceased to be Lola because the name no longer suited such a wicked little girl. Which came first, the chicken or the egg?”

“If you put it this way, the chicken certainly came first. The reason why I became a wicked little girl was certainly because of you. You sucked my blood. Do not blame it on the name.”

To be precise, I had sucked her blood just up to the point where she ceased to be Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.

But it’s not that I wanted to avoid responsibility. On the contrary, I wanted to take responsibility.

“The name Oshino Shinobu has become almost synonymous with a

blonde little girl, hasn't it?"

"I doubt that was the intention when aloha boy named me that. The reputation has been unfairly forced upon both the names 'Shinobu' and 'Oshino'."

"Don't you think it's that you refuse to acknowledge their individuality by calling Oshino 'aloha boy' and Hitagi 'tsundere girl' instead of their real names?"

"You seem to be hell-bent on shelving me as a non-compliant character from the start. You used to call the aloha boy 'dirty old man' and 'aloha bastard.' In fact, it's quite disrespectful to the spirit of Aloha itself."

"I wonder if giving someone a random nickname or continuously mispronouncing their name is no longer the trend. It used to be the hallmark of a great detective character."

"On the other hand, when you were called 'Heart-Under-Blade's servant' by the vampire hunters, did it not feel like it suited you perfectly?"

It did.

I could hardly believe that the version of me called 'Araragi-kun' by Senjougahara Hitagi and the one called 'Koyomi' by Araragi Hitagi were the same person. Also, when referred to as 'Araragi-senpai' by Kanbaru and as 'Araragi' by Oikura, even the differences between the two felt insurmountable.

Just as there ia no single truth, I'm not uniform either. With each different call, there is variety.

Araragi the boy and Araragi the detective; young Araragi and Investigator Araragi, they are all strikingly similar yet so distinctly different.

"It seems unexpectedly crucial how one is referred to, and I suppose a mere symbol like a name can't be easily discarded."

Yet, I had done so, for Hitagi and Shinobu both.

"Maybe I really have no choice but to run for office. I'll soon have the right to stand for elections."

"To think someone like you already poses a threat by merely

possessing the right to vote, and now you seek to enter the realm of candidacy?"

"I presume that when you became a vampire six hundred years ago, there must have been extraordinary determination behind your decision, but what did it feel like to be named by Death?"

"Do not call her 'Death' again. While I cannot recall the experience accurately, I believe it wasn't bad. It was a rather cool name."

And so, I had compelled her to let go of that cool name. On the other hand, you could argue that there is nothing wrong with either Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade or Oshino Shinobu, as long as she's happy with it.

"To sympathize arbitrarily is also a feeling of blasphemy against the laws of nature."

"Law is not a law of nature. As far as that tsundere girl is concerned, I think it is sad and pathetic to put a sinner's name on her."

"Who's a sinner?"

"But that may be what it means to be a servant. To bear half the name and sins."

That was precisely the relationship between her and I—in this context, it might be unjust to bind Shinobu to the name Oshino forever. A producer's name is not displayed.

If one must bind, let it be my name.

"What is with that strange look in your eyes, staring at me after such a long time?"

"Don't say it as if I used to look at you with strange eyes often. No, no, I just thought that one day I'd have to take you to the Eight Seas of Oshino, too."

"Taking the heroine all over Japan is too troublesome. Do you intend to become a great travel mystery author?"

"Well, I don't know where the Eight Seas of Oshino are, though."

"They are in Yamanashi Prefecture."

"Seriously, you know every nook and cranny of Japan better than I do. Yamanashi, yeah? The seas. Not seven seas but eight."

“I shall be honest, they are not seas.”

“They’re not?”

“They are springs. It is probably there that a woodcutter dropped his ax. With eight of them, it is bound to happen in one.”

“That was supposed to be a foreign fairy tale. Choosing between a gold ax and a silver ax, it’s like choosing between separate surnames for married couples. The truth remains submerged in the spring.”

“The Eight Seas of Oshino is a nice place, but I would prefer to visit Futarasan shrine in Nikko, where the legendary sword, Nenekirimaru, is said to be. I’d like to compare its length with that of the Aberration Killer.”

Our honeymoon plans were being continuously incorporated with outside arrangements.

I’d heard about the Nenekirimaru. I suppose the force pulling us toward battle wad quite strong. However, resolving issues through battle and violence was no longer the modus operandi of our times.

Futarasan Chugushi shrine? I remember hearing about Nikko’s Futarasan Shrine from Hanekawa, but maybe it was a different place.

“The location is different. The Futarasan Shrine is a World Heritage site along with the Nikko Toshogu Shrine, while the Nakamiya Shrine is close to Lake Chuzenji. Well, although I have never been there myself, so I cannot say anything for certain. If you’d like, I could scout out the location for you. With a grand jump, perhaps?”

“It’s not like we can allow ourselves a preview of our honeymoon, it would spoil the experience entirely. Revealing any plans beforehand is strictly forbidden. That being said, if we’re going to be near Lake Chuzenji, I suppose it wouldn’t be too far out of the way to visit Senjougahara since it’s along the path. Was it Ashikaga where that rowdiness festival you mentioned takes place?”

“Indeed, the birthplace of the shogun family.”

“Ashikaga is also in Tochigi. Had the Muromachi shogunate been established there, history might have been different. So, Ashikaga City is at…”

Ungracefully, I checked on my smartphone, and found that it was far from both the Nasu Highlands of the Killing Stone and the center of

Nikko's Senjougahara. It was basically on the opposite side of Utsunomiya. Since we can't eliminate those two, it seems we have no choice but to give up on the rowdiness festival this time. Although it would have been extraordinarily interesting in terms of tracing Hitagi's roots, surely such an odd festival couldn't be held year-round.

We just couldn't build our plans around a rowdiness festival.

"Considering our rigorous adjustments for a two-night, three-day trip, it's just impossible to cover the entirety of Tochigi Prefecture. Still, Shinobu, is there anywhere else you'd like to visit? If it's included in our route, we'll prioritize it."

"That reminds me, was Irohazaka not in Tochigi as well?"

"Irohazaka…"

"It's a slope with forty-eight hairpin turns leading to Lake Chuzenji. To be exact, there are separate slopes for ascending and descending. Each slope is assigned one of the fifty sounds of the kana, apparently."

"Forty-eight slopes is impressive, but the Iroha song's forty-seven syllables—or even its fifty—don't quite match, do they?"

Should I search for an answer to this mystery on the internet? No, such knowledge must be acquired through experience, without prior research or preconceptions. If this is the slope leading to Lake Chuzenji, then it must be the very path to the battlefield.

"We'll be going by car, you know. It's not a bridal car, not a camping car either, it's a slightly larger minivan."

A larger minivan may sound like a contradictory description, but yes, it's the only way to describe the size of the car that had been settled on after various replacements.

My Volkswagen was sold because I couldn't maintain it while I was away for overseas training. I'm sure it's in good hands somewhere by now.

Maybe the car you are driving was once my Volkswagen?

"Don't worry, I'll arrange for a proper child seat."

'Who could feel relieved after hearing that…? Wait a minute, master."

"What's going on? Is this an emergency?"

“Although it is inevitable that I shall accompany you on your honeymoon due to our shared soul and body, do you truthfully intend to place me in a child seat before the tsundere and the monkey girl?”

“Ah, child seats may be embarrassing, but traffic safety takes precedence above all else. I’m also in a complex position with the Hearsay Department, the FBI, and the like. I still maintain that traffic safety—in this automobile-driven society founded on the auto industry—is of ultimate importance.”

“It may be your call to subject me to the shame of sitting in a child seat, but that is besides the point. As for the monkey girl, she will do just fine in any case.”

“Calling people monkeys is rather outdated, wouldn’t you say? But monkeys come to mind when talking about Nikko. There might really be something to the notion that, in their ability to express remorse, monkeys are the more venerable creatures.”

“Do not impose upon me that trio of wise monkeys—see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. I share a bond with the monkey girl, born of a fleeting moment. Clashing souls—hers, and mine—it was a rap battle that I remember well.”

“Your memory’s distorted.”

It was the time I clashed with Shishirui Seishirou.

Details were sparse, but reflecting on that occasion, I wonder whether ‘she’s fine’ would suffice to describe the connection that arose between them. For that matter, even the relationship between Kanbaru and me, forged in bloody battles, left much to be desired.

“That’s right. To one such as I, acts of killing are no more than a daily, mundane occurrence.”

“An assertion as lofty as that of a divine being.”

“But really, master. What I wish to discuss is the tsundere girl.”

“Wassup?”

“There has not been a meeting, or so it would seem, between myself and the tsundere girl.”

Strictly speaking, there has been.

Before Shinobu had yet to be bound within my shadow, in the ruins of

the abandoned cram school, under Oshino's instruction—there was a little girl sitting cross-legged, with a deeply-donned helmet, tucked away in the corner of a classroom, and she had been spotted by Senjougahara Hitagi.

But that was it.

I couldn't call it a meeting, nor could I say that they had exchanged any words—and as such, it could be considered that Senjougahara Hitagi's bonds with both the King of Aberrations, and the vampire husk, were nothing much.

However, when it came to Araragi Hitagi, things were not that simple.

"We're living separately across the sea now, but in the not-so-distant future, we'll be living under the same roof with Hitagi. It's only natural that I introduce you to her then. This honeymoon serves as an excellent start for that."

"I had intended to follow you stealthily by hiding in your shadow. Well, if need be, I can move to the shadow of your sister again, and stay at home like I did before."

The former King of Aberrations, who used to treat everyone with arrogance, grumbled shyly.

It goes to show how heavy the sin of stealing a name can be, turning a king into such a timid character.

"I want to introduce my proud partner to my new partner."

"Shall the Senjougahara battlefield become a true battlefield?"

"I chose my words poorly. I want to introduce my trusted comrade to my wife."

Is the term "wife" even still appropriate in this Reiwa period? Unfortunately, I still lack enough information to gauge Japanese standards, let alone determine whether or not it is politically correct. But it feels quite proper and historically accurate.

Whether or not Senjougahara became a battlefield for real was another matter entirely, but there was a delicate balance that had to be struck—if handled poorly, Araragi Hitagi could revert back to being Senjougahara Hitagi. Nevertheless, this was not simply negligible.

Yes, it was to my younger sisters—Karen and Tsukihi, and even to my parents who were still at home—that I managed to conceal the existence of Shinobu during high school (as well as that of Ononoki-chan, who was living with us for a time). However, when it came to my wife-to-be, the story was different.

I had made a promise with Hitagi from the very beginning.

When we started dating, we vowed not to keep secrets about the supernatural from each other—so, in that sense, introducing Shinobu to her was long overdue. I cannot help but be astonished that I had neglected to address such a subplot for almost eighteen years.

“We live in a time when people get angry if you don’t tie up loose ends. I can’t believe it. The beauty of a story lies in the cobwebs it weaves, whether they are resolved or not—wasn’t it always a secondary concern?”

“I understand what you are saying, but it becomes a big problem when you are the one saying it. No, there are many other unresolved subplots, are there not? Why is it that only now you are meaning to arrange a meeting between me and your tsundere girl? Was it not more beautiful to leave it up in the air?”

“Now that Senjougahara Hitagi has become Araragi Hitagi, it’s time to finally change that ‘tsundere girl’ title, too.”

“Why would that be?”

Personally, I would like Kanbaru’s title as the “monkey girl” to be changed as well, but chronologically, it should be the tsundere girl first, because—

“Because, you will be the girl, the daughter. Araragi Hitagi will be your mother.”

“Mother of all that is good, what?”

“Not of all that is good, just your mother. I plan to adopt you.”

The time has come—for Oshino Shinobu to become Araragi Shinobu.

007

“Hey Oikura, I’m going on a honeymoon to Tochigi with Hitagi tomorrow, would you like to come along?”

“Die.”

“You shouldn’t tell a twenty-four-year-old to die.”

“I had too many things to say, so I simply and succinctly said ‘die.’ I didn’t want to speak more than one word to you. But, I’m an adult too, so let me organize and list my objections one by one: don’t invite me on a honeymoon, don’t invite me the day before, and I hate you. Hate the hate with hate by hate for hate to hate at hate of hate.”

“What? You came to the wedding, didn’t you? That was the first time I saw you dressed up. You looked fantastic.”

“I attended as a friend of the bride. Don’t address me so casually, you married man. Don’t say ‘fantastic’ without any sincerity.”

“Can’t you take time off? Just for three days.”

“When will you stop thinking like a college student? I have work. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and the day after that, and the following day, and the day after that and the one after that and even the day after that. I may have unpaid leave but no paid leave.”

“You should retire, just say you’re sick and need to be hospitalized.”

“Don’t try to put me in a hospital. Even if every page of my schedule book was blank, I would eternally refuse to go on a trip with Araragi.”

“Which Araragi is that, though?”

“It should go without saying. It’s not at all complicated. I’ll continue to call Senjougahara-san by her maiden name. After all, she’s going to get a divorce soon anyway.”

“Ahahaha. So, about that.”

“Don’t ignore my curse.”

“I have thoughts about us sharing the same surname. Well, I knew it was a sudden invitation and you might not come, but if I didn’t at least give it a try, I thought you’d be complaining later.”

“Don’t make me out to be someone so troublesome.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“If you’re asking if I don’t like being called a troublesome person because I am one, the answer is yes.”

“You really are troublesome.”

“Even if I had an appointment booked six months in advance, I still wouldn’t go.”

“Your schedule is packed all the way to half a year later. That’s amazing for a town hall worker.”

“Ah, isn’t this just like you? Even after getting married, you never quite become an adult.”

“Well, now that I have a family of my own, I thought we’d have a close-knit family relationship with you from now on…”

“Impossible. I don’t have a family.”

““That was tactless of me. My apologies. Let me formally apologize for what I just said. However, you did accept and witness our marriage registration, so you’re practically quasi-family to us as a married couple?”

“No, that was part of my job. What even is a quasi-family?”

“Witnessing for us was part of your job too?”

“Senjougahara-san, who ended up with a guy like you who barely understands how to fill out paperwork, brought the marriage form without a name listed for the witness. So I reluctantly lent my name just so it could be processed.”

“We are very happy and grateful for that, but it’s also kind of worrying that you might end up becoming a co-signer for someone’s debt someday like this.”

“Don’t worry. If I were to become a co-signer, the debt review would not even pass.”

“What kind of past do you have?”

“A turbulent one. My credit history is a mess. My name got changed and reset once, but still.”

“Oh?”

“Haven’t I mentioned that? No no, you just forgot as usual, Araragi. When we first met by some mistake, I wasn’t Oikura.”

“Was that so? Oh right, I think Ougi-chan mentioned something like that, maybe she didn’t—”

“Who’s Ougi-chan? Another new addition of the Araragi Girls? She wasn’t at the wedding.”

“She’s stuck at school, unfortunately, so couldn’t make it to Tochigi… Oh, I see. You didn’t idolize Euler just because you were Oikura. You loved mathematics even before the Old Oikura began.”

“Old Oikura or not, it’s still me—it’s just a change in the name.”

“I see, that makes sense.”

“What other cases could there be?”

“Well, I feel like for some people, their name really shapes them. Like me - having the name ‘Koyomi’ makes me want to become a historic figure.”

“Your ‘koyomi’ and ‘history’ use different kanji.”[1]

“No way.”

“How embarrassing it is to think that someone like you is representing Japan and training in America. I wonder if I should revoke your working visa with my authority.”

“Are you such a powerful figure? I can’t believe someone so capable could be exploited like this. I’m not exactly representing Japan and training at the FBI Academy or anything.”

“So you’ve always been a student.“

“Don’t you worry about me. I’m enjoying my eternal life, oh, I mean eternal moratorium.”

“You’re not exactly living up to your name. Not turning the pages of the calendar.”

“You have a way with words. In that sense, you’ve grown up, just like

your name suggests."

"How annoying. I know that when I was attending Naoetsu High School, people were badmouthing me behind my back, calling me 'Oikura Sodatanai.'"[2]

"I didn't know that… I know you were called 'How Much,' but why 'Sodatanai'?"

"Then I've just revealed some unnecessary information. Senjougahara-san told me about it some time ago."

"She might be the source of that rumor. If it was during our first year of high school."

"How can that be, when I looked after that sickly girl without holding back anything?"

"She loved to talk bad about people she liked. And she didn't speak ill of those she wasn't interested in."

"It was just a lovely little tsundere moment, that nickname, wasn't it."

"Oh, for the first time in my life, I heard you praise someone, although it was such a simple compliment."

"Is it just Senjougahara where you're going?"

"Well, despite everything going on, my schedule is getting packed. It's only a two night, three day trip but…I've got to catch a flight to Washington on the fourth day."

"You should be the one taking time off. I'm sure they'll understand over there."

"Even though I've been pulled every which way, I'm still technically in

training. The wedding itself was quite the forced march…and with everything commission-based at work, I can't take too much time off."

"Sounds like a tough work environment all around. I definitely wouldn't go, but as a witness I'll be happy to proofread your honeymoon itinerary. What's the roadmap looking like?"

"It's nice getting your corrections again."

"I doubt you remember back when I used to proofread your work."

"I remember, maths fairy."

"Want me to send you to an early grave?"

"You're the only one who could raise me up or put me six feet under. Anyway, no way around the two night, three day schedule, so I've had to drop some places like Ashikaga, but there are still a few spots we just can't miss."

"You should build in some wiggle room on a trip like this. Otherwise it'll be too jam-packed."

"You're probably right. We're driving back and forth to squeeze it all in."

"Driving instead of taking the bullet train? Why? You want to be jammed in while stuck in traffic too? Haven't you heard of traffic jams?"

"Don't shoot down the idea all at once. I did suggest the bullet train, but Hitagi-san really wants to drive."

"Right."

"Ever since high school, she got her license on the sly before she even

graduated. She's just that kind of person, you know? I heard about this mountain pass called Irohazaka from someone else, she said she really wants to try."

"They'll rescind her license for that."

"Well, that's a problem for day two. On the first day we're going to Nasu Highlands. There's something I need to see there– the Killing Stone."

"Killing Stone? On your honeymoon?"

"I know how that sounds, but it's not like I'm excited to see the Killing Stone itself. That's just incidental. The main thing is I want to go glamping. It's really trendy right now. Barbecues, hot springs, a nice relaxing experience– that's what I'm looking for."

"No amount of barbecues or hot springs can offset a place as ominous as the Killing Stone. If you're not excited about it, then who is?"

"The next day after having nasuben in Nasu, we'll go down from the highlands to Nikko. We'll see the Sleeping Cat at Nikko Toshogu Shrine."

"Not answering my question at all. The Sleeping Cat… to commemorate Hanekawa-san, I assume?"

"She's not dead. Hanekawa is still alive… probably. But I read about it in the guidebook– apparently there is a bird carved into the back of the Sleeping Cat. Cat with wings. It made me wonder if Nikko Toshogu Shrine was the inspiration for Hanekawa's character."

"Surely you're not going just to see that– it's a World Heritage Site. You should try to learn something other than math, you know."

"Along with Nikko Toshogu Shrine, Futarasan Shrine nearby is also a World Heritage Site, and it's famous for being a shrine for matchmaking, so I'll be sure to properly visit and pray there too."

“Ah, now it’s sounding more like a honeymoon. Finally.”

“I also heard there’s a huge sword, Nenekirimaru, at Chugushi Shrine near Lake Chuzenji, so if possible, I’d like to show… uh, see it too.”

“Suddenly you’re acting all suspicious. I feel like there are opinions from lots of different people mixed in. Are you two really deciding this just between yourselves?”

“As you can see by me asking for your opinion like this, I do want to take in lots of different views– that’s just the democratic sort I am.”

“Hmm… smells fishy… I’ll launch a negative campaign against you if you run.”

“What an unpleasant threat.”

“So you want to climb Irohazaka to get a look at that big sword?”

“I’d love to ride one of those swan boats on Lake Chuzenji if they’ve got any going. We talked about climbing Mt Nantai too but it looks like you need to submit a climbing plan for mountains at that level, so I dropped that idea.”

“It’d be great if you got lost and died up there. Just you, mind.”

“Well, if that’s what you want I could make it happen, but if there are casualties it causes trouble for the mountain. I don’t want to upset nature. So I’ll drive carefully on Irohazaka. And if we’ve got time after that I want to see Kegon Falls and Ryuzu Falls before heading to Senjougahara while there’s still daylight.”

“Why’s that? To see the stars?”

“I’m going along with Hitagi’s idea that it’ll be an anticlimax if we can see stars before we get to Senjougahara. She wants us to watch the sun

slowly set when we get there, spot the first star, and then spend the whole night gazing at the starry sky."

"Rather than stargazing, it sounds like serious amateur astronomy. What, we're camping out the second night too?"

"The second night we sleep in the car."

"Hardcore."

"To be honest, when I suggested it I was planning we'd look at the stars for a couple of hours then head to a hotel. Apparently it's got some nice ones. But when I asked, Hitagi said it was her lifelong dream– to look at the stars all night long, without blinking. So it's full-on hardcore stargazing."

"She really is a romantic. And you just casually invite me on some crazy tough trip."

"When we die, we die together, Oikura."

"Death comes for us all eventually, I suppose. I won't deny the allure of stargazing, but unless it's a meteor shower or a lunar eclipse, can you really spend a whole night just staring at the sky without getting bored? I've spent my life looking at the ground, so I don't really understand it."

"Don't casually mention such sad things…"

"I've stomped on the ground all my life imagining it was you."

"Don't casually mentions such scary things either… But the stars keep moving relentlessly, you know. It's like timelapse photography- or fixed point observation, I guess… They may not be shooting stars, but if I can make even one person's wish come true, I've no complaints. Except for the other guys, that is."

“Other guys?”

“Oh, I just mean there might be other tourists there stargazing too.”

“Maybe, it being a weekday and all… I won’t call it a bad hobby, but I can’t imagine those starry-eyed stargazers sticking it out all night. Even if it’s summer, it must get freezing spending a night on Senjougahara, right? It’s pretty high up there.”

“Is it? I thought it was a marsh, so I imagined it was quite flat.”

“What was that about climbing Irohazaka?”

“Oh right… I’d better take precautions against the cold then. That’s good advice. You really let your guard down, Oikura.”

“I thought Senjougahara-san wouldn’t overlook something like that. What’s the plan for the last day after stargazing all night at Senjougahara?”

“I’m keeping that day open, as a buffer. If all goes well, we’ll finish up with one last stargazing session, then head home. But I don’t anticipate a trouble-free trip, travelling with me and all.”

“How lame… With you, Araragi, you’re not so much a troublemaker, but more like a firestarter.”

“So what do you think about our honeymoon roadmap?”

“It isn’t over until you get back home.”

“What do you mean?”

“After spending the entire night stargazing, descending Irohazaka seems to be a risky proposal, no matter who drives.”

“We’ll be fine. It’s not like we’ll be drinking while watching the stars, and we’d already have traveled the path once on the way up.”

“But you wouldn’t have. You’re ill-informed, Araragi. The ascent and descent of Irohazaka are two separate paths.”

“Ah, I think I recall hearing that from… someone else.”

“What someone?”

“A fanged someone.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I haven’t been there myself, but if the geography class I took in college was accurate, the ascent should be Irohazaka no. 2, and the descent Irohazaka no. 1.”

“The ascent is the second slope? We must view the mountain peak as the starting point, I see. The seat of the gods.”

“The forty-eight syllables on the slope are counted from the bottom up. Anyway, drive safely. Before descending, make sure to take a nap. Apart from one major concern, that’s pretty much all I wanted to say.”

“There’s something bigger than a traffic accident? You should’ve led with that!”

“If mentioning the ominous Killing Stone was simply a side note, then I assume the main events of the honeymoon are the glamping on the first night and stargazing on the second, right?”

“Well, yeah. I’m looking forward to Toshogu Shrine and the Nenekirimaru, but it’s actually my first time going on a trip with Hitagi. That’s why those two are something I centered on.”

“Have you checked the weather forecast?”

“Huh?”

“What if it rains?”

I was stopped dead in my tracks.

The next day would greet us with clear, blue skies—except in my hometown. As an aside, the weather in Washington, D.C., where I currently have a foothold, also seemed to be quite pleasant.

What a convenient age we live in, being able to confirm the conditions of various localities through weather cameras online. Presently, at least, there was no rain in Tochigi Prefecture; there were no approaching typhoons, no signs of tornadoes.

It seemed that the ominous prediction—or should I say, the gracious advice—of the Eleventh Witch Oikura, was not an immediate cause for concern.

However, a low probability of rain is not necessarily the bare minimum condition for activities such as glamping or car camping. After all, we weren't going to be roughing it outside with no shelter, so we wouldn't need to cancel our honeymoon trip unless there was torrential rain, relentless snowfall (in summer), or anything equally pressing—that is, if stargazing wasn't the main event.

When stargazing is concerned, the problem isn't just rain; even a hint of cloudiness would be enough to render our plans null and void.

It had been quite some time since I had last gone stargazing. In fact, the only time I could recall doing so was the starry date with Senjougahara Hitagi. And even that had been a sort of surprise attack. I had completely forgotten that, when it comes to the conditions of the sky, one can only truly leave it up to fate. While we can try to predict whether it will rain or not by resorting to long-term weather forecasts, the matter of whether the sky will be clouded over is still, quite literally, up in the air.

"Don't worry, I knew all that beforehand—that's what makes it an authentic experience of stargazing, including the looming uncertainty. To enjoy such thrilling moments, knowing that it could all turn out to be a wild centipede chase, is what makes a visit to the land of the giant centipede even more compelling."

"That's not what the giant centipede is about."

“Even if it happens to be cloudy or rainy, there’s nothing to worry about, really. It’s not like we’re in New Zealand; we can always make a return trip within our country whenever we please.”

That’s how Hitagi comforted me as I fumbled around in a flustered panic.

It was something an astronomy enthusiast would already know, after all.

“Family is about repeating the cycle over and over again, getting another chance to make things right no matter what. That is what makes a family.”

Yeah, that was a good point.

Although I was happy to inadvertently learn that little bit about Hitagi’s notion of family—and it became even more poignant when I thought of what her family had overcome—at the same time, I couldn’t help but be painfully aware of my own shortcomings. No matter how well I’d thought to prepare for this trip, meticulously assembling the itinerary and drafting the roadmap, the harsh reality was that I still couldn’t shake my lackadaisical, go-with-the-flow personality even at the age of twenty-four.

It’s better to feel pain than nothing at all, right?

If, on our honeymoon, we went stargazing only to be met with impenetrable cloudy skies or rain so heavy that we couldn’t even open our eyes, at least we could laugh about it later. Of course, it’s always best if the sun is shining.

The uncertain future looms ahead.

“But what I’m most happy about is finally being able to meet Shinobu, after all this time. My dream has come true. I’ve missed so many opportunities to meet her, ever since that close call at the abandoned cram school. I was starting to doubt if she was even real, or just a girl from your imagination.”

Wouldn’t that be great.

It was a big deal to be suspected of such a thing, but at any rate, Shinobu, a very non-imaginary girl, was shy, so the process of persuasion—or rather, convincing her—proved to be quite difficult.

Even with my blood-related family like Karen and Tsukihi, she had

managed to keep her secrets, so she argued that it wouldn't be a problem to keep the same secret from Hitagi (quite a sound argument). It was a pretty tough task to break down her reasoning. The former Fire Sisters had not known about aberrations, let alone the existence of vampires, but for Hitagi, aberrations were already an open secret; there was no reason to keep hiding them. Eventually, I managed to convince her through reasoned arguments.

Even so, if it had been old Shinobu, she would have probably withdrawn into the shadows like the elusive Sun Goddess herself. Nonetheless, she not only chose to reveal herself in this candid manner but even declared that she would accompany us on our honeymoon. Maybe she, too, was changing in some ways.

Admittedly, I failed to persuade Oikura to join us on this trip (truth be told, I genuinely wished she would have come even though I knew she wouldn't). But, regardless, our quartet's journey to Tochigi has taken shape, with the Nasu Highlands as our destination. It's not exactly ideal, but we can only hope that at least in the open field of Senjougahara, it will be sunny.

When it comes to family outings, the time it takes to get everyone out the door can feel excruciatingly long. So long, in fact, that the hapless sort who forgets to check the weekly weather forecast might be tempted to just hurry up and leave, regardless of how well-prepared they are. But as much as I didn't want to keep everybody waiting, there was still one more thing I had to take care of while we were in town.

Before heading to the rendezvous at Kanbaru's house, I needed to pay a visit to the very place where Hitagi and I had held our wedding just a few days prior—North Shirahebi Shrine.

There hadn't been any remarks from Oikura about it, but it suddenly hit me while I was chatting on the phone with my childhood friend. Having held our wedding at that fateful shrine and pledging our eternal love, would it really be permissible for us to visit a shrine of marriage in another prefecture, even if it was a World Heritage site? It was a question that crossed my mind, right at the brink, due to my skeptical nature.

This was something Hanekawa had taught me when I had been studying for exams: praying too much for success at multiple shrines and temples might cause the gods to quarrel amongst themselves, so it's better to focus on just one. Now that I think about it, that advice might have been a subtle criticism of my usual carefree attitude rather

than being a mere tip about praying for success. Well, besides, an attitude of indiscriminately relying on divine intervention might not be all that praiseworthy and it's maybe better not to indulge in it.

That said, I couldn't help but feel that it would be a little excessive to go out of my way to respectfully avoid places like Nikko Toshogu Shrine and Futarasan Shrine, which we had already incorporated into our roadmap. Hence, I decided to settle the matter by informing the somewhat temperamental god of North Shirahebi Shrine about our plans before leaving.

When I had visited the shrine one early morning during high school, I had experienced a bizarre encounter with a huge sword supposedly slicing me into pieces. It felt like an appropriate time to overcome that trauma.

"What a surprise! If it isn't the newlywed Sakuragi Koyomi-san."

"Although I'm honored, don't compare me to the recently made-into-a-film red-haired basketball genius. My name is Araragi."

"Sorry, I stuttered."

"No, you did it on purpose."

"I stubbed."

"It wasn't on purpose?!"

"I slam-dunked."

"Are you talking about the manga?"

"I read it back in the day without paying too much attention, but having Sakuragi, Akagi, and Miyagi all on the same team, don't you think their surnames are quite the curious coincidence?"

"Don't criticize an epic manga like that."

Speaking of Akagi, the protagonist does have red hair… that, in a way, might actually make it more realistic.

"Real is also a basketball manga, isn't it?" remarked Hachikuji Mayoi, the shrine's resident deity, displaying her keen insight.

Although I'd like to introduce her as the same Hachikuji as ever, she appeared in her adult form in the shrine maiden outfit, just like when I saw her at my wedding. To me now, she appears to be of a similar

age, but why? Isn't she supposed to be a lost eleven-year-old fifth-grader god?

"Didn't we explain it at the wedding? From the moment I first met you, Araragi-san, time has continued to flow without interruption, public opinion kept being updated, and it was concluded that it's not desirable from a compliance standpoint to have a grown man and a school girl with a backpack in the same frame. So, this is how my character design was changed."

"Is compliance stronger than even divine power?"

"Child labor isn't a good thing either, so we changed how I look, even if just visually. My essence is still that of a fifth-grader."

While that could be a difficult setting in itself, I suppose it's true for everyone. We may have matured in appearance, but inside we remain fifth graders.

Since turning twenty-four, my character had not changed much from when I was a high school senior. I couldn't plan a trip properly and I genuinely enjoyed the Slam Dunk movie.

"Yes, it was just a bit confusing with Sakuragi and Akagi."

"That does feel like an adult perspective, but when it comes to last names, there's quite a bit to think about in recent times. It's the perfect topic. Would you listen, Hachikuji?"

Since we had a meeting time and couldn't spend too long in conversation, I got straight to the point. This, too, might be the mark of being an adult. When I was a high schooler and Hachikuji a fifth grader, we would have spend three hours just talking about Slam Dunk. We would get carried away with Rukawa's story.

And now, as I transitioned into describing the ever-flowing theme of honeymoon, I couldn't help but feel a certain melancholy. The days of being able to control time, back when it seemed impossibly long, had slipped through my fingers.

"I see. So, you're going to Mount Akagi."

"Listen. To me. Properly."

"Mount Nantai, then? I can't really discourage you from going there, I guess."

She may have had a complicated sentiment as a god, as Hachikuji had been living in such an unknown mountain. But she was a novice deity, and she takes pride in having protected the town from an infectious disease, even leading the virus astray. She's done some pretty scary things, when you think about it.

"Personally, I think if you're going to introduce Shinobu-san to Senjougahara-san—pardon, it was the missus."

"The missus? Are you also taking the stance of Lieutenant Columbo?"

"If you're going to introduce Shinobu-san to Mrs. Araragi, I'd really like you to introduce me as well, and soon."

"But didn't you more or less meet the other day at the wedding?"

"She can't see me at all. That means she's completely devoid of doubt. It seems she's gone through a lot, but maybe, she's never lost sight of her home."

"Her home."

"Or her family."

That made me wonder if I had always been just floating aimlessly—from the day I first met Hachikuji Mayoi, the day I had that fight with my sisters and up until today when I was leaving for my honeymoon.

"If you were to remove your doubts, there would be nothing left of you, Araragi-san."

"Spoken by you, it sounds like it's over for me, like a divine prophecy. Well, honestly, it would be a sad story if my doubts were gone and I couldn't see you anymore. From morning until night, I want to gaze upon you only."

"Even the adult version of me?"

"I wouldn't be deceived by appearances, you see."

"That means you see a fifth-grader in the adult me as well."

Though the image of a high school senior and a fifth-grade girl messing around together may indeed not be modern, the reason for such a bond could be the length of our relationship, and how we've grown to have such conversations—sitting side by side at the shrine.

I wouldn't want to lose this. This sense of who I am.

“It may be for the best that doubts, like feeling lost, stay hidden. But it seems that you continue to be lost, both at home and abroad, so this ill-fated bond may persist for a while longer. I said it myself but I must admit, ‘ill-fated bond’ is quite the phrase.”

“Fateful alone would already be exceptional, but this is a persistent illness, It almost seems like I’m about to become unfaithful.“[15]

“There’s danger in using the word ‘unfaithful’ as a newlywed. In your case though, you’ve been unified with Shinobu-san for a long time, and so, regardless of your doubts, you might be able to see me. Being a member of the Hearsay Department makes you almost an expert, I’d presume.”

“Mhm. I hope that’s the case. It’s undeniably true that I’m feeling lost at the moment. You could say I’m wandering aimlessly—as ever. I’ve had a wedding, and we’re legally married, of course. The honeymoon we’re about to go on could also be called a product of this hesitation.”

“It’s admirable that you’re pondering over a surname so much, Araragi-san. After all, names are very important.”

“Really? You say that after you just called me Sakuragi-san? And for that matter, all eighteen years of mispronouncing my name?”

“I’ve over-chewed it, and my jaw is growing tired.”

“Don’t go chewing someone’s name like it’s gum.”

“I’ve brought it up a few times before, but when my parents divorced and my last name changed, I was bothered too. I was really fond of the name Tsunade, you see.”

“Yeah. It may sound strange to say, to me, you’ve always been Hachikuji, so now the name Tsunade feels new.”

Tsunade Mayoi.

Maybe for a snail, that might be more fitting.

“Well then, why don’t you become Araragi Mayoi at this point?”

“Isn’t that being too wishy-washy for the Araragi family? Are you trying to create a legitimate Araragi Harem?”

“Although there has never been such a dubious organization, now the mere thought of one is incredibly exhausting. It feels like there wouldn’t be a single fun thing about Araragi Harem.”

“It’s so sad seeing you withered away completely… I can’t bear to look at you, Araragi-san. I feel like saying I hate you. Please don’t talk to me.”

Being told this by her adult version carried a different weight. On the other hand, the memory of a full-blown fistfight with a fifth-grader was far from becoming for a police officer.

“I’d like to bury you just to erase that memory.”

“What on earth are you saying in these harrowed grounds? Anyway, the idea of adopting Shinobu-san far outstrips the former Araragi-san.”

“So I thought I’d adopt you as well at this point, but it just doesn’t work out.”

“Please, don’t create a project like a philanthropic attempt to adopt orphans from all around. No, you may create such projects, but… In your case, Araragi-san, the impression that you are indiscriminately collecting these orphans isn’t a good one.”

In any case, adopting an adult version of Hachikuji as my child had a completely different sense of criminality than adopting a fifth-grade girl.

“If anything, I’d rather become your adopted son, Hachikuji. Hachikuji Koyomi—doesn’t it sound dated and cool?”

“It certainly slides smoothly like the Iroha slope. There’s a miraculous appeal to it… but what’s a vampire to do by joining the ranks of god’s retinue?

“What’s more,” Hachikuji said while looking at my shadow that had fallen within the shrine grounds. “What does Shinobu-san think about it? I doubt that she’s very keen on the idea of meeting your wife, let alone becoming an adopted child to you.”

“Should we just ask her? Would have to wake her up, though.“

Since the early hours of a human morning were the late hours of a vampire night, Shinobu was currently fast asleep inside my shadow.

“You could say she’s sleeping bloody amd dead, completely exhausted from our debate.”

“There’s a debate going on? What do you mean, sleeping bloody and dead—is that some kind of vampire slang?”

“It’s ‘cause we’re family that we fight like that, you know.”

“Oh, you sound like you know what you’re talking about, coming from a dysfunctional family.”

“Who’s from a dysfunctional family?”

Actually, me.

Now, I may be slightly exaggerating with my words, but it was true that, especially during my first and second years in high school, the Araragi family had a tendency to lose its functionality as a family.

The sixteen-year-old Araragi could barely imagine a future where he could enjoy a carefree dinner with his sister—let alone one where she works the same job. I fell on hard times in high school, I had no expectations from my parents, and I had fallen out with my sisters. On graduation—or dropping out—I planned to move out of the house immediately.

It was a mess, pretty much.

“A mess, huh.”

“And it’s not like we’re functioning even now. My parents have both been dispatched to Tokyo, I’ve based myself abroad, and my other sister is nowhere to be found. The family’s dysfunction is barely being maintained.”

“Please don’t maintain it.”

As I pondered repeatedly, Karen, the most untamed and liberated person I know, was beyond my imagination, protecting our home all alone.

“And that’s precisely why I want the home I build to be filled with warmth and ceaseless laughter. Is that too much to ask?”

“A home filled with laughter? It’s undoubtedly better than one filled with ceaseless abuse.”

“Don’t even try to joke about that. You can’t compare laughter with abuse.”

“In all seriousness, though, I’m rooting for you. Make sure that nothing like the cycle of abuse continues. Here’s to proving wrong the ridiculous notion that children raised in dysfunctional families can’t build healthy homes. Show them what you’re made of.”

“I never thought I grew up in a dysfunctional family, but that’s probably what it was.”

If anything, it might be that this reflects Hitagi’s unwavering resolve. It wasn’t about function or dysfunction, her family had already crumbled once before. And even as a single-parent household afterward, they were far from well-balanced or stable—there was a time when Hitagi was losing weight and had to continuously visit the hospital.

So, the idea of building a new family must have been a great leap that she resolutely took. It was for these reasons, her view of what makes a family, that I wanted to respect and support her.

If we really wanted to, we could have chosen to move in together, have a common-law marriage, or live together without changing our names to leave an escape route should things turn sour. But maybe she wanted to cut off any chance of escape entirely.

It wasn’t like I was completely devoid of such sentiment while deciding to marry, after all this time of being together since Mother’s Day during our third year of high school.

I can’t be a student forever.

“I still see you as a student of sorts, going to the FBI Academy and all.”

“When you put it that way, I can’t really deny it…”

“Still, once you and the missus start sharing your life together, it’s clear that you can’t just leave Shinobu-san as she is.”

“Isn’t there any other way to call her? It’s a bit confusing for a goddess to call her missus.”[16]

“Should we call her your spouse?’”

“Weird how wife doesn’t seem appropriate, but spouse does.”

“Your wife knew about Shinobu-san and accepted her proposal with that knowledge, so I think there must be some understanding between them.”

“Yeah, she looks enthusiastic. Even said she was looking forward to meeting her today.”

“And she approved of the adoption too?”

“I have that prepared as a surprise for our honeymoon.”

“Sounds like a recipe for divorce.”

Hachikuji showed a concerned look.

With her adult version, it didn’t feel like a joke, there was a serious impression.

She really was a talented actress.

“I’m just dumbfounded. Making big life-changing decisions in some surprise. Regardless of whether or not it’s Shinobu-san, adoption is a major step that will steer the direction of your married life. Are you planning to push through with such a monumental decision just because of the starry, romantic atmosphere?”

“Maybe I should mention it beforehand?”

“It’s not a ‘maybe,’ it’s a must. If you don’t bring it up beforehand, you’d do better not saying anything at all.”

Oh, such grown-up advice.

If she were still in fifth grade, she would’ve most probably gone along with the mischief and agreed enthusiastically, “Yeah, let’s surprise her!” But being chastised seriously, she did make a point.

This wasn’t a conversation to have under a starry sky, and besides, it might be cloudy anyway.

“But… as long as you’re considerate of your wife’s feelings, I do believe that adopting Shinobu-san into the Araragi family would be the best course of action.”

“As a friend?”

“A god.”

Quite the grand scale we’re talking about here.

I made things that way, I suppose.

“I’ve been training with Gaen-san, so I’ve learned a thing or two about sealing away powerful aberrations simply by knowing their names. Shinobu-san was sealed away by Oshino-san more than six years ago, and yet, Oshino-san himself has been away from this town for a long time. The seal grows weaker.”

“It does?”

That’s certainly not a comforting thought.

In other words, it suggested the potential revival of Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire—an event that a god could not overlook.

I hadn’t considered this possibility. Not considering it felt practically like inviting risk.

“If anything, it’s a miracle that Shinobu-san stayed restrained with Oshino-san’s name, the wandering specialist. If she were a Killing Stone, she would’ve broken free long ago.”

I’m not overly keen on singing his praises, but it’s impossible not to recognize that Oshino was a remarkable specialist—it would be off the mark for an amateurish FBI agent to think that Shinobu’s seal would break if the current situation was left unchanged, and it may be nothing more than a novice deity’s unfounded fretting.

I didn’t expect it to last for one or two centuries, but it could very well endure until Oshino’s death. In any case, I believe that time has come. Rather than allowing the seal to continue under the name of a random old man, it was only right that she was sealed under my name, both as the responsible party and her guardian.

“Well, yeah, there’s no denying he was also a participant in that hell. Even if we leave out the name Oshino, it’s perfectly fine to keep the Shinobu part.”

“That’s an exceedingly condescending attitude toward our benefactor. But from a divine standpoint, it’s probably for the best that Oshino-san’s name isn’t completely removed. For example, giving her a name like Araragiaaaa wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“From a human standpoint as well, that would be a bad idea.”

This isn’t some RPG, after all.

However, once it’s brought up, the matter of what name I should give Shinobu became a tantalizing question. This wasn’t mere whimsy. In fact, it was the pureblood vampire who had transformed her—or rather, Princess Acerola, or Lola—into a vampire: Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master had fully designed her current name.

While I had no intention of defying the divine advice that it’s better to

retain Shinobu's name, it might be amusing to play with the idea as an idle pastime—like considering names for my own child, what about giving her a new one?

"Hmm. It's not derived from anything in particular, but how about Araragi Tsubasa?"

"That's too heavy! Besides, I think your wife mentioned something similar a long time ago."

Was that the case? Well if so, we were a couple cut from the same cloth.

"Araragi Nadeko?"

"Not just heavy, that's a precursor to a dysfunctional family. Please don't name the adopted child after a woman you've cut ties with."

"It's not just the names of women I've cut ties with."

"I guess you're going to say Araragi Sodachi next?"

"I was going to say that, yes, but I'm not actually estranged from Oikura. She's more of an ill-fated bond."

"Whether you call her a childhood friend or an ill-fated bond, it certainly changes things quite a bit… Who else? Any other estranged women in Araragi-san's life? Tsukihi-san, maybe?"

"Though her whereabouts are indeed unknown, I have no intention of severing ties with her. She's my sister."

"You've always been consistent in that regard. Well, it's not ideal to name a living acquaintance after a great figure, a deceased one or the like."

"Right, it isn't."

"Oshino-san didn't name her something like Oshino Mememe either."

"Mememe?"

Shinobu's character would have been quite different. She might not have been as shy.

"Who knows, she might've been a young girl who loved neatly prepared mackerel rather than donuts."

“Oshino Shimeshimeshime[17] doesn’t sound right either. So, in the spirit of you who is not only a great figure but also a divine being, how about Araragi Mayoi?“

“Terrifically heavy. And it’s just plain creepy if you name your daughter something like that. Why are you so desperate to bring Araragi Mayoi into existence?”

“If we take you and Shinobu, divide by two, we might just end up with the perfect little girl.”

“What’s with this little girl idea? It’s creepy when you look at adoption like that. No one like that should be a foster parent. It’s not cunning, it’s just recklessly said.”

Hmph.

We had come up with many thought experiments, but in conclusion, Araragi Shinobu seemed to be the most suitable choice for now. There was no sign that an idea greater than that would emerge, whether in terms of this process or sealing.

The world works in wonderful ways, doesn’t it?

“But you know, I can’t help but think that if my name wasn’t Araragi Koyomi, I might have turned out to be a completely different person.”

“Yes, you may have ended up dating someone else entirely, too.”

Although I didn’t want to believe that fate could be so drastically altered by a single name, actually, even during my junior and senior high school days, a different attendance number could easily change my position within the class.

Having a starting letter “A” in my name, my attendance number was always either one or two, and just after the class change, it was inevitably a conspicuously awkward position for self-introductions.

I had thought of it like a vile, loathsome four-syllable word that smeared on my beloved wife’s name, but I found myself grateful for the name given to me by my parents: Araragi.

And technically, it was the name of my father’s father’s father’s father —maybe. It may have originated from a grandmother somewhere along the line, but the further back in time we go, the more unlikely that becomes…

“I should get going, though. I may not go on as many tangents as before, but I still lose track of time when I talk to you.”

“It’s such an honor for a goddess to hear that.”

“Do you want to come with me? To Senjougahara?”

“Even the adult version of me is still a novice. I dare not venture into Takamagahara.”

Takamagahara? Oh right, that sacred place at Futarasan Shrine. Everyone’s so knowledgeable about Tochigi Prefecture. If only I had paid more attention in geography class…

“Right, I’ll pray from this distant mountain for a sunny day at Senjougahara.”

“That’s thoughtful of you, but you’re the god of lost children, not the god of weather. Or are you going to make me a teru teru bouzu to ward off the rain?”

“Oh, no, I do serve as a goddess at this snake-themed shrine now, but I was originally just a lost snail. I may not be as powerful as the sun goddess Amaterasu, but I still have some control over the rain.”

Hachikuji’s smile was radiant, almost childlike, filling me with warmth like the sun itself.

“Rain or shine, it remains elementary for me.”

“Well, well, I never thought I’d see the day when I could accompany the esteemed Araragi-senpai and the beloved Senjougahara-senpai on their honeymoon! There can be no greater honor! Oh, dear me, I seem to have let my excitement get the better of me. That’s right, she’s no longer Senjougahara-senpai—she’s the beloved Araragi-senpai! The honeymoon of the esteemed Araragi-senpai and the beloved Araragi-senpai!”

“Sharing a surname in marriage is trickier than I thought, especially for someone as inflexible as you. Uh, if Hitagi is trying to force her senpai persona on you just to have you tag along, please let me know before she arrives? I’ll say something on your behalf.”

Descending from the mountain after seeking the guidance of the local deity, I made my way towards the rendezvous point—the Kanbaru residence. There at the entrance, I was greeted by my lively high school junior who was waiting with great anticipation.

As a medical student aspiring to be a sports doctor, she was wearing a white coat over her tracksuit—a rather inappropriate attire for a honeymoon, but then again, this wasn’t Kanbaru’s honeymoon.

By the way, when she served as a bridesmaid at our wedding, she had worn a pure white tuxedo-like outfit, stealing the spotlight not from the bride but from the groom instead.

Since retiring from the basketball team, she had grown her hair out a bit, but now it looked shorter, not quite a buzz cut, but shorter than when we first met. Well, being in the medical field, even as a student, was a bit more demanding than playing sports, I guess.

“Hmph, what do you think you’re saying, Araragi-senpai? I’ve always dreamed of attending a party to bid farewell to your single lives ever since high school, and here you are testing me.”

“Planning such a thing since high school, huh…”

“Surpassing my dream, I am elated and surprised to be whisked away on your honeymoon. Speaking of surprises, I always thought you two

would certainly get married, but I never expected you to become an FBI agent!"

"It's quite a surprise that you're aiming to be a doctor yourself… umm, medical school takes six years, right?"

"Yes, I'm graduating the year after next, so it's the perfect timing for me as well. There couldn't be a better timing for joining the two of you on your trip. It must be a reward from the gods."

"I met that god just now. She says she'll pray for clear skies over Tochigi, all the way from a far-off mountain."

Well, I don't think a snail god can control the weather—but it did provide me with some comfort. At the very least, it cleared away one of my doubts.

"Hehe, to think of going to Senjougahara with Araragi-senpai, that's an idea that could only come from you, Araragi-senpai. I'm truly impressed."

"Hm…? Did you mean Hitagi by the first Araragi-senpai?"

"Who else would there be?"

"Won't you call her Hitagi-senpai?"

"I could never presume to do something so bold."

Ah, flexibility, it seems we've got none of that around here.

Whether coming of age or reuniting, it seems it's always going to be a bit complicated dealing with a junior who's climbed aboard the bandwagon. It was endearing, but that didn't make it any less convoluted.

"Speaking of which, you and Hitagi were quite a convoluted pair, as well. When you were known the Senjougahara and Kanbaru—uh, what was it called again?"

"The Valhalla Duo. I hope you don't forget it—it's a treasured memory of mine."

"Sorry—though I have to say it was a title you came up with yourself. I wanted to forget that origin. In hindsight, could Tochigi Prefecture's Senjougahara have been similar to Valhalla?"

It was completely different since it was a battleground for gods, but

the imagery seems somewhat close. At the very least, they both shared elements of mythology.

“Hmm. In middle school, I knew about Valhalla but not about the Senjougahara battlefield. If I had known about it, I might’ve called ourselves the Senjougahara Duo.”

“Your involvement would be lost if you did that… Although it’s interesting to think about it, your name does include the word ‘god’; it somehow suits you as the master of the North Shirahebi Shrine, rather than Hachikuji.”

“I wanted to become a doctor more than a god.”

It’s quite incredible how resolutely she put it.

I could never say that I became a police officer, an FBI agent, or even a college student simply because I wanted to.

“To become an FBI agent without even wanting to be one only highlights the extraordinariness of you, Araragi-senpai. But then, why Washington?”

“It was supposed to be for Hitagi, but things have a way of not going as planned. We ended up being a married but separate couple for a while after tying the knot.”

“That’s quite like Araragi-senpai too.”

“Which Araragi-senpai are you talking about?”

“I meant Araragi-senpai.”

Ah, it’s hard to tell… The distinction couldn’t be made through wordplay or different intonations. How does the world conduct itself in this matter? When two old acquaintances get married, how do they differentiate between each other?

“Even if I were to take on the Senjougahara family name, it wouldn’t save me from this confusion. What do you think about this, Kanbaru? Since your mother is Gaen-san’s sister, you could have been Gaen Suruga, right?”

“Who knows? After all, my parents eloped, so now, even whether they officially registered their marriage is questionable.”

“Could that really be the case?”

“Although I did introduce her as Kanbaru Tooe, it’s not like I personally looked into my family’s official records when I was just an elementary schooler. However, for Mom, considering the circumstances, she might have wanted to change my last name—to cut ties with the Gaen family.”

“Ah, yeah, Gaen-san’s family is a complicated one.”

“To be honest, it’s difficult for me to answer the question, ‘What if I were Gaen Suruga?’ Regardless, if it had not been for the Kanbaru family taking me in after my parents passed away in an accident, I wouldn’t be who I am today.”

I see…

More than just a name, it symbolized her identity. If the term family unity encompassed such things, it was indeed difficult to dismiss outright.

At the very least, completely refuting it wouldn’t be fair.

“As for the issue of couples having the same or different surnames, I don’t really have any comments to make. Personally, I’d rather see the laws regarding same-sex partnership systems put in place first. But even once that’s settled, insisting on having the same last name might seem like a joke. As I mentioned before, I do have an attachment to my own last name, Kanbaru. However, I can understand the desire to share a name with the one you love. If I were still in high school, I wouldn’t have hesitated to give up my grandparents’ name to become Senjougahara Suruga.”

Yeah.

I suppose that’s one way to think about it, and it should be respected. After all, even without being married, one might say that you should let others have their own chosen name.

I wonder if Hitagi thought about it that way too? Araragi Hitagi does have a nice ring to it, but it might have just been a playful whim.

“Suppose, there was a time in high school when you had the opportunity to become Hanekawa Koyomi, you’d have done it, wouldn’t you? Regardless of whether it led to dating or marrying later on?”

“Aah, actually, that’s right. I even wanted to become Araragi Tsubasa.”

“In a ‘wanna be like her’ way.”

“Well, I suppose in a broader sense, that’s cosplay or something like that, but there’s just something about the desire to merge with someone or something you love that’s just irresistible. You might call it fusion, or maybe assimilation—”

Maybe that was the case even for vampires—the mechanism of being bitten and turning into a vampire through infection could be seen as similar. It was an unexplainable rationale otherwise.

“…So it’s the feeling of being legally obliged to do that which makes it less appealing, I guess. It would have been nicer if the system allowed for mixing both options, sort of like averaging the two, rather than being forced to choose one of them.”

“Something like Senjougahararagi Koyomi?”

“Divided by two.”

“Gaharagi Koyomi and Gaharagi Hitagi?”

I had only said it based on my vague knowledge of some countries being like that, but it fits surprisingly well. Gaharagi.

Even Hachikuji doesn’t stutter like that.

“If it were about you and Hitagi’s last names, you’d probably be called Valhalla Hitagi and Valhalla Suruga, right?”

“Not too bad.”

“Though I must say, there’s no vibe of a finance investor and a sports doctor in that.”

“Ah, as for you and Oshino-san, it’s gotta be Arashino Koyomi. So cool.”

“Don’t marry me off to Oshino. And the kanji would change.“

“It’d still be Arashino Koyomi if you married Shinobu-chan, though.”

“Hasn’t my sense of values been updated? I thought I reached a point where I can’t marry little girls anymore?”

Seriously though, marriage aside, what’s up with the bonds of names? It’s like the entire family system is designed to bind individuals through their names—not only aberrations

“That’s why I decided to keep the Shinobu part of her name, if I were to adopt Shinobu as a foster child of Hitagi and me.”

“Eh? A foster child?”

“Oh man, I haven’t told you. Well, I’ve been secretly working on a plan. I was thinking of discussing it in the car, actually. After all, it’s not like I can keep Shinobu in the shadows from my partner all the time we’re married.”

“Wait a moment, Araragi-senpai. Are you planning something like this without telling Araragi-senpai?”

“If you mean Hitagi by Araragi-senpai, then yes. I initially planned on making it a surprise, but I received a divine revelation to not even attempt that. So, instead, I’ve decided to casually bring it up during our car ride.”

“I’d like to offer my own divine advice as well. Although I have no intention of meddling with your marital affairs, I think both surprising her and casually mentioning it in the car are not the best ways to go about it,” she said with a stern face.

Was it her medical background that made her feel this way? It felt more like I had just been diagnosed with a serious illness.

A second opinion, huh?

“Well… then, how should I tell her? If both a surprise and a casual conversation are off the table, what do you suggest? Speaking with my eyes?”

“Just tell her there’s something important you need to discuss with her. Bring it up the same way you did when you proposed to her.”

“How did you know I proposed?”

“Well, it’s because I received a very long phone call right after it happened.”

“She hasn’t changed at all since high school, has she.”

I don’t think she was playing me up to her junior.

But, maybe it wouldn’t be inaccurate to say the same about myself in high school. On closer observation, this also wasn’t something to be mentioned casually.

Marriage problems.

Right, because this was a problem.

When it comes to unity, wasn't it actually downright indolent of me to have left Shinobu, who is, in a sense, one with me, inextricably linked to me, and with whom I share a common destiny, hanging in the air as we held our candlelit ceremony?

To adopt her and have her bound to my name seemed like a wise foresight, But wasn't it also quite the hindsight, in that it had come too little too late?

After all, as someone still attending the academy, I couldn't quite shake off my student-like mentality. Though I wasn't a particularly studious individual, I was working in law enforcement, and such a disposition was certainly unbecoming.

"To Hitagi, it's a bigamous marriage to begin with. The unbreakable bond of blood that exists between me and Shinobu is something she's probably not comfortable with, which is why adopting her might be met with resistance."

It's easy to sweep things under the rug by saying we shouldn't worry about it because she's an aberration, a ghost, a sister, or a corpse. But those excuses only work until you're out of high school, or perhaps up through the Heisei era.

"No, Araragi-senpai. As your junior, I can agree with you up to the point of considering her as a little sister. However, even high school me would be slightly bothered by a corpse. In any case, I understand there may be some things on your conscience, but surely you haven't forgotten?"

My junior Kanbaru, a.k.a. medical student Kanbaru, was attempting to continue her diagnosis of me, the patient. But, in that instant, a loud and somewhat obnoxious car horn rang out, interrupting our contemplative debate outside the Kanbaru family gate. The honking was quite rude by city standards, but it was my dear wife responsible for the commotion.

Araragi Hitagi's minivan—the ultimate combination of practicality and leisure—pulled up to join us. Just as I had ordered, a child seat was installed in the rear of the vehicle.

For now, we'd had to make do with a rented one, but eventually we'd invest in a custom made, heirloom-quality model that would last us a

lifetime.

With a press of a button, the side door swung open, revealing that Hitagi's car—far from the old-fashioned type she tended to favor—was completely under electronic control. At the very least, I could safely assume this vehicle wasn't haunted, like the aforementioned corpse doll.

"Alright, let's go, Araragi-senpai. I've always been excited by the prospect of glamping—a combination of camping and glamor, after all."

"Please don't take our glamping honeymoon so grammatically, Kanbaru-kun."

It seemed she had already switched gears beautifully, but I wondered what Kanbaru was going to say. Regarding the issue of adoption, there was a lingering sense of unease, but nevertheless, our two-night, three-day honeymoon trip to the lost Senjougahara was to begin.

010

“Do you know about the Trolley Problem? What exactly is the problem with it?”

My wife, the minivan owner, who was once known as the Cyclone and now as Mrs. Araragi Hitagi, inquired with this sensitive topic while exercising her natural rights to steer and accelerate our vehicle en route to Nasu Highlands in Tochigi Prefecture—the trolley problem?

It was hardly the most suitable, auspicious, and fresh topic for a couple on their honeymoon, but at this stage was there anything left unsaid about this exhausted issue?

“Well, I have a rough idea, actually. You are on the trolley. Should you continue straight, you’ll end up knocking down the five workers on the rails. But if you pull the lever, you can change the course of the trolley—and lying ahead, there’s only a single worker. So, either you run over five people or avoid them and accidentally hit one. That’s the tough dilemma that it puts the responder in, right?”

“Mm, I think that’s pretty much the gist of it… though there’s another version where you’re not actually right on the trolley but near an external lever, seems like the impression of being on the trolley is easier to convey. So, if you understand that, you should also understand what the problem is.”

From the passenger seat, I responded first.

This was my first trip not just to Nasu Highlands but moreover to Tochigi Prefecture itself. And sitting in this seat, I had no means to assist Hitagi with any navigation. My sole task here was to entertain the driver and prevent her from getting bored, as her smartphone, securely fastened to the dashboard holder, speaks up the directions.

Machines have taken our jobs.

It was a three-hour trip to our destination.

That’s closer than Helsinki.

“I don’t understand. It’s not like I’m going to get run over, so why not

just keep going straight ahead?"

"A cold-hearted answer."

"Please give me a reason why I have to accomplish such a huge workload as operating a lever."

"Such a person is the driver of this minivan?"

"Nice, isn't it? It's the one from the first time I drove you, but I love how it has a glass roof. I didn't intend this, but it's perfect for watching the stars during a car sleepover. It's not an exaggeration to call it our bridal car."

"Oh, absolutely, Senjougahara-senpai. I mean, Araragi-senpai," came the voice of agreement from the right rear seat. Hitagi's loyal aide, Kanbaru, who was aiming for a career in a field that required high ethical standards, hadn't agreed with the trolley problem just yet.

"Isn't the problem really asking us to simplify the question—whether it's more important to save five lives or one?" Kanbaru rationalized. "In medical terms, it's called triage."

"I see. So you are given the responsibility of riding on the trolley and gripping the lever, just as I, the driver, have been entrusted with the lives of the passengers. You really have a way with words, Kanbaru, my dear junior. Your explanation is so easy to understand. Athletes in the future who are examined by you will surely be fortunate. If I had continued with track and field, I would have liked you to be my attending doctor, too."

She was spoiling her way too much.

We couldn't join the rowdiness festival, then—maybe, this newlywed was more delighted by the rare outing with her middle school junior than to be on our honeymoon.

But that's fine.

"So the correct answer is to pull the lever and plunge towards the one person. Either way, it's quite simple, isn't it? Calling this a problem is like inventing a problem that doesn't exist, and that, in itself, is the problem."

So that means it's a fabrication of a nonexistent problem—though that is what thought experiments are all about. Or to put it in a mathematically persuasive manner, since the four-color theorem has

already been proven by computers, it's no longer considered a problem?

In any case, just small talk.

"The correct action is to jump off the trolley."

Then, from the opposite side of the back seat—the child seat set on the left side—came a rather grumpy voice.

"I suppose, if one can jump off without causing mischief, that would be an option. However, it'd be a rather ironic twist if that resulted in the loss of one's life. Surely the prerequisite should be to protect one's life above all else—before considering the lives of five or even just one other."

"Well, to call it a premise, Shinobu, this is one of those problems where it's forbidden to do anything other than manipulating the lever."

"If any action other than operating is prohibited, then it's likely that even thinking is prohibited. As the lady of the house says, you have no choice but to plunge in."

Though the logic had been stated, if it was a thought experiment, surely thinking would not be prohibited—and so, the one referred to as the lady of the house, Hitagi, nodded in agreement.

"Yes, that's right, Shinobu-san."

Ooh. A conversation between the two of them.

Hitagi and Shinobu were talking.

Not necessarily because we were heading towards a honeymoon focused on stargazing, but the atmosphere felt like it was being shared by everyone.

Up until now, even though they had been very close to each other, they never had any contact points, but now they were in the same car and acknowledging each other. Though there were strong doubts as to whether the first conversation should be about the trolley problem, surprisingly, a theme that had nothing to do with either of them might have been more suitable than starting with a weirdly timid reminiscence or a stiff self-introduction.

An apt choice.

As I considered whether the term “lady of the house” was apt for addressing the wife of a “master,” the situation became somewhat linguistically precarious. Still, it must be admitted that there was no fault in any expression one could choose in this context—after all, it was a little girl speaking from the position of a slave.

“Abstain from the honorific ‘san’. ‘Shinobu’ will suffice. I understand our positions well enough, even if it may not appear so. By becoming the companion and spouse of my master, you also hold a place of importance in my estimation—belonging to an order higher than my own.”

“Very well, then. Shinobu it is.”

The name tumbled easily from her lips, without hesitation.

This quality reminded me of a commanding woman who, even during her middle school days, had organized and led an army at the Senjougahara battlefield—including Kanbaru. Her talents hearkened back to the olden days.

“I can’t help but sense a certain wickedness in the questioner’s nature. They aren’t asking whether we’d choose the lives of the five, or that of the one, in earnest—they’re deriving a perverse pleasure from watching us struggle to make that decision. Isn’t it right to simply run over such distasteful tastes?”

“Your outlook’s always scary.”

I wonder if this wasn’t a dilemma faced by everyone, but with varying degrees? Maybe not medical triage, but the issue had been simplified to a simple thought experiment, allowing for direct engagement.

Even I, in my humble position, had faced similar choices before…

“Well, Shinobu, I’d be curious to hear your reason for insisting on jumping off the trolley. Even if it doesn’t kill you, if it leaves you injured, wouldn’t it be better to just keep riding it?“

“Well, you see—if we remove my body weight, and that of the driver, from the trolley, it should reduce the force of the collision. With a lighter trolley, it might be possible for the five strapped workers to bring it to a halt.”

Oh?

She’d given it more thought than I’d imagined—I’d imagined her to be

giving thought only to donuts. There had been no mention of the workers' physical prowess in the problem statement, but it was implied, given their line of work. You could reasonably assume they'd be stronger than average.

If such a group of workers joined forces, they might really be able to stop an empty trolley. Or at least, it seemed more likely than sending a lone worker to try and halt it; the chances of survival seemed five times higher.

"I see! So what the trolley problem is really asking us, is whether we can come together in the face of adversity—whether we can trust in the bonds between people! It wasn't some devious riddle after all!"

Kanbaru had grasped the concept nicely. She'd make an excellent doctor someday. Though I was no athlete myself, if I ever sustained an injury on the job, I'd want her to be the one to treat me.

"Hmm, perhaps I should've tried seeing things from the worker's standpoint, rather than the trolley driver's. Indeed, if I used the four as a barrier, I might be able to save myself."

In response, the senior was a bit malicious at the core, only, well, it was also the truth. The survival strategy itself, that if five people were herded together, one of them might be saved, was not wrong—all living creatures have managed to survive that way.

"I didn't think sending in an empty trolley would be the right thing to do, but believing in survival was the key, huh?"

"No, no, Hitagi. There's no correct answer to the trolley problem. As you said, the goal of the problem is to create conflict. If you come up with a solution like Shinobu mentioned, they'll just switch the problem from a trolley to a truck, or even a bullet train. That's just how it goes."

Such endless variation in the thought experiment is what makes it a thought experiment—or a mean-spirited quiz.

"If you try to read the intentions of the problem setter, they don't want to cause conflict as much as they want you to make a choice. To prioritize the lives of many over the life of one," said Shinobu in a cold tone.

Her tone seemed detached, or maybe it was that she was nervous having her first conversation with Hitagi. In any case, it's not like Hitagi, who once led an army, and Shinobu, who was once the King of

Aberrations but actually the king of a nation without any people, could be expected to be good at socializing.

“The intention of the problem setter. Sounds like a college entrance exam study session. It brings back memories, Koyomi.”

“I’d rather not recall it. Kanbaru is a current exam student, isn’t she? Compared to obtaining a medical license, a college entrance exam may not seem like much.”

“It’s hard to compare college entrance exams and medical. There’s a different kind of pressure with multiple-choice exams since you can get a perfect score just by guessing.”

“Isn’t that genius?”

Could it be that we have our own Black Jack junior in our group? What a reassuring travel doctor to accompany us on this honeymoon.[18]

“Nah, I’m a surgeon, so I’m praying I won’t have to step in. I want to bear witness to this honeymoon as your junior to the very end. Without the need for triage.”

“Are you assuming you’ll have to triage Hitagi and me?”

Well, that could be considered another variation of the trolley problem… If it was a matter of saving five lives against one, there might be conflict, but even if she chose the five, she wouldn’t be blamed for it. And that includes self-blame.

At least an excuse could be made.

But, if it was one-on-one, it would make a direct impression of selection. Personal preferences and values might be inadvertently exposed.

“How would you decide in such a case, in a medical setting? Like, if there were two patients with similar symptoms and you only have enough equipment or medicine for one, what kind of triage would you perform?”

“In that situation, it’s more like a disaster scene than a medical setting —It would probably be a first-come-first-serve basis. If such criteria are not set, everyone would freeze in that speed battle regardless.”

“Hmm.”

The answer couldn't be found in a multiple-choice test.

That's the sort of problem of choices it was.

"It might be essential to view each life not as an individual entity but to consider it of equal importance. However, the principle of prioritizing women and children in rescue stems from a perspective distinct from that of chivalry or feminism, and remains a fundamental notion. That is, of course, if individuality is disregarded."

"Ahh, that sounds familiar… the strategy for survival in the biological sense. Prioritizing the lives of children over the elderly, and women over men, leads to the progression of a species…, or so it goes."

While this was an oversimplification, there was no question that it would be necessary to have such a simplified perspective in the midst of panic.

Especially aboard a sinking ship.

Or, in a runaway trolley with no brakes…

"Fundamentally, why on earth is there not a brake on that trolley? It's also quite odd that five or six workers are working while it's in motion. Surely, the one who ought to be held accountable is the management."

The problem is naive, Shinobu said.

I'm sure it was deliberately left broad for the sake of finding creative answers, but if we held the management accountable… Even if doing so would be to weigh down the trolley further, one could argue that it should be staffed with two operators.

Like a copilot on a plane.

In moments of crisis, this way, the responsibility would be distributed, much like the ambiguity of who presses the button in an execution. Not a pleasant concept by any means, but such a system that allows for accountability to be placed on an individual seemed out of touch with modern times.

It eliminated personal biases and individuality.

"But that's a perspective from the side of the culprit running people over," said Hitagi. "From the perspective of the victims, wouldn't they want responsibility to be clearly assigned? Imagine being hit by a car

—if the blame kept shifting from the driver, to the traffic laws, to a structural defect in the car, or even to the government, it would be impossible to even begin pinning down responsibility. In that sense, wouldn't you want evil to simply be evil?"

It was also true that the world was not only filled with such blatant evils—we had learned this even back in high school. The roles of the victim and the aggressor could be easily flipped, as demonstrated by the trolley problem. In this scenario, was the victim the workers being run over, or the driver who is being forced to make such a bleak choice? According to the specialist in a Hawaiian shirt, none of the passengers in this minivan liked playing the victim role.

"In sum, I guess it all boils down to, 'be cautious while driving to avoid traffic accidents,' right, Araragi-senpai?" Kanbaru commented towards Hitagi, and not me—an impressive landing stride for a random conversation.

Still, I wish she'd emphasized that point more strongly. Regardless of whether on Irohazaka or anywhere else, I would absolutely avoid any situation where a driving mistake would result in an unfortunate end to our honeymoon.

Araragi Koyomi at twenty-four, my immortality was merely enough to heal paper cuts quickly. If I were to plummet from a cliff at breakneck speed, I would likely die in a very ordinary way. I certainly did not want to run into a supernatural fox.

"That's right, I'll keep that in mind. You're absolutely on point, Kanbaru. However…" As Hitagi praised her junior, she couldn't seem to suppress her old self, adding, "In this kind of thought experiment, I always find myself wanting to discover a third option to beat the smug game-master, who forces us to make this difficult choice."

It wasn't hard to understand why she didn't like feeling as though she's playing into the hands of the problem setter, regardless of which choice she makes.

If this were the Senjougahara Hitagi from her senior year of high school, she would have unquestionably snapped at such a problem and proceeded to vie for the title of the one who runs over the questioner with a speeding trolley.

"Once you find yourself confronted with such a problem, you know you are being taken for a fool. The crux of the problem lies in the naivety of both the question itself and the sentiment behind it,"

remarked Shinobu from her child seat. “They completely fail to consider that the respondent may be a social deviant who would desire to efficiently mow down as many workers as possible if given the chance.”

It wasn’t about agonizing over which life to save.

They would struggle with the inability to kill everyone at once.

From that point on, our boring time in the car was spent discussing thought experiments and similar topics such as the prisoner's dilemma, the Stanford Prison Experiment, the Milgram Experiment, Turtle Soup[19], and the marshmallow test. Before we knew it, we reached our first-day destination—the campsite at Nasu Highlands—by early evening.

Miraculously, we arrived without any accidents, disputes, or situations that could have led to a "Tochigi divorce" in place of a "Narita divorce." Hitagi was, in fact, quite pleased that she managed to drive the long distance without once relinquishing the wheel (although we did take breaks at service areas as a safety priority).

Her satisfaction may have been due, in part, to the decreasing opportunities to drive offered by the growing prevalence of remote work and online shopping. Though she seemed aloof from the world, there may have been an element of stress or frustration accumulating.

My best friend, Oikura, told me that I might as well die for even entertaining the thought of going on a long-distance road trip and sleeping in a car for my honeymoon (her use of "die" was her endearing mannerism). But maybe, in this aspect alone, she had unexpectedly—and uncharacteristically for me—hit the mark.

We had read it in the guidebook, but the vast beauty of nature that greeted us was beyond our wildest imagination—and it looked like we had been blessed with good weather, too.

Though not to say that there wasn't a single cloud, it was a brilliantly sunny day with a vibrant blue sky. Honestly, I had assumed that Hachikuji Daimyoujin's spiritual guidance would have been little more than a comforting thought, but it appeared to have been genuinely effective—which, in turn, gave rise to a nagging sense of guilt, like a tugging at the back of my hair. Maybe we should save visiting the Nikko Toshogu and Futarasan Shrines for another day.

"I wonder how far it'd be to the Killing Stone."

"Ah, the ever-vigilant worker, Koyomi. I just checked the map app for

you, and it seems to be within walking distance."

"Really now?"

"About an hour and a half on foot. Up a mountain path."

"Please lend me the car."

It seemed that even now, she was reluctant to let anyone else take the wheel—despite us being no strangers anymore. But then it dawned on me: with the change in her surname, did she need to change the registration details of the minivan in question?

If so, that'd be a niggling deal for sure.

Not just for my dear, but for me as well.[20]

Anyhow, although they were still tentatively feeling each other out, Hitagi and Shinobu's first meeting and conversation, though awkward, can be said to have not resulted in a killing spree—it was a bit of a let-down in the sense that we had expected irregularities in the trip, but on the other hand, we wouldn't want another development like that between Kanbaru and Shinobu.

It was difficult to tell since both were so composed, but they looked tense, and I felt it too—lucky for us, Kanbaru, who doesn't read the atmosphere, was there to help.

We were blessed not only with good weather but also with such a good junior—so Shinobu was now back in my shadow.

It was a beneficial byproduct of Hachikuji's influence on the weather: as a former vampire, Shinobu wasn't very fond of sunlight. So it was worth considering a visit to Nikko[21] Toshogu Shrine.

Well, having lost enough power to be deemed harmless by professionals, going out in sunlight wouldn't turn her to ash, but there were traits and instincts that couldn't be lost simply by changing her name—traits that were inevitably present.

Like the fear of heights even with fall prevention guardrails in place.

Becoming Assistant Inspector Araragi or Agent Araragi didn't mean everything about the boy Araragi would be lost—even those aspects that one would want to lose. Things like a honeymoon in the car.

So, after the meeting with my dear wife, forced on me in a most casual manner, Shinobu went to take a midday nap in my shadow—by

the time I went to check the broken Killing Stone at night, she would wake up.

Following Kanbaru's advice, I decided not to surprise Hitagi in the car with the proposal of making Shinobu our adopted daughter. But if it wasn't going to be a surprise, when should I bring up the topic?

I think we needed to discuss it during the honeymoon and it really wasn't something that could be decided remotely—but first of all.

We had to get through this whole glamping.

As evidenced by my use of the phrase "get through," I had never been the camping type, though if push came to shove, I could manage an outdoor sleep… And the same went for Hitagi.

"I'd heard rumors about this, but I never imagined that the tents here in glamping would be like actual houses. It looks more like a lunar base than a tent. Even more magnificent than my apartment."

As we stood before the impressive dome-shaped tent, which required no pegs or stakes, Hitagi looked a little confused.

Our thoughts and impressions seemed to coincide.

From the outside, it had looked more rugged, like a giant snow dome, but inside, it was indeed a respectable house. Even if Oikura had joined us, though she had declined or rather rejected it, there was plenty of space to accommodate her comfortably.

I could live here forever.

"My boathouse back in Washington pales in comparison."

"Wait a minute, Araragi-senpai. Araragi-senpai lives in a boathouse in Washington?"

"Yeah, it's always been a dream of mine. When you visit, you should spend the night."

"When I return to the U.S. someday, I'd love to live in a trailer house, " my automobile-obsessed wife declared before turning to address her junior without a honorific. "As you've likely heard, neither I nor Koyomi are of any use when it comes to camping. So, we're relying on you, who seems to have led a rich campus life, to help us out—especially when it comes to tonight's barbecue."

"Ah, well, I'm not sure I'd be of much help either. You both know how

rustic I can be, so I only barbecue about once a week since starting college."

More than enough, I'd say.

She'd probably already surpassed my entire lifetime's worth of barbecue experience by now.

"Hmm, I heard that glamping allows you to come empty-handed, but in the end, we still have to cook for ourselves, don't we?"

"Well, Araragi-senpai, it's debatable if barbecue is considered 'cooking'…"

"Of course it's cooking. The way the meat is cut, the way it's skewered —all of it makes a difference in the taste."

As we had never done this before, our attempts were admittedly mixed with quite a bit of Hitagi's conjecture. But, if the essence of cooking was in the gathering of ingredients, then this campsite had us newlyweds amply taken care of.

There was no shortage of food supplies or cooking utensils.

And they had even prepared a bouquet of naturally sourced flowers for our tent… and Hitagi seemed delighted with such a royal surprise, so I began to wonder whether I should broach the topic about the Shinobu thing out of the blue tomorrow night…

"Oh, speaking of which, Araragi-senpai… and Araragi-senpai."

"Can you really tell the difference between us? Aren't you getting confused yourself?"

"Allow me to officiate today's barbecue, but tell me, how do you two usually handle food and cooking in your daily lives? I'm curious."

"Well, I generally eat out. I hardly ever cook for myself anymore."

"As for me, it's not like I cook, but I don't really eat out either. I bring take-out back to my place and eat at the boathouse."

"I think you're mentioning living in a boathouse way too much, Araragi-senpai. Well, whether you and Araragi-senpai will share a boathouse or a trailer house in the future remains uncertain. But, I can't help but wonder, how would the household chores be divided up between the two of you?"

“We don’t drink sweet nectar all the time, you know.”

“That’s not really a phrase.”

“I work hard to afford a maid,” was Hitagi’s Western-like reply.

She didn’t seem to be joking.

“I’m sure Koyomi would have no objection to that. But, I must add, if this were high school Koyomi, he might become overly dependent on the maid. (Haha)”

“Don’t (Haha) me.”

I don’t think I had ever demonstrated any particular liking for maids, but then again, our memories of the past can be quite unreliable, right? My nostalgia for only being interested in the braided glasses-wearing class president might very well be a distorted memory.

Well, I must admit that I’d never want to ask Hitagi to be a stay at home wife either, nor would I believe that I myself could handle all the household work flawlessly. Of all the various names one could use, “housekeeper” simply didn’t suit us.

Rather than a maid, I had a feeling that hiring a housekeeper would maybe be the best answer for the Araragi household.

We did have the means, thanks to our double income, and considering that one of our jobs came with the risk to life, our salary was—classified, to say the least.

“Alright, I understand. Then, as a maid, I shall accompany you to the United States—”

“Don’t give up on your dreams.”

At least go to the U.S. to study at a medical school or something… Well, Kanbaru in high school might have seriously considered that, but it would be a light joke for twenty-three-year-old Kanbaru to make.

One could even call it a heavy joke.

“First of all, you’re not exactly cut out for housework, are you? I never thought I’d be cleaning your house just a few days before my wedding.”

“I always thought that one day you would suddenly become capable of tidying up, but, alas, it never happened.”

“But still, my adorable Kanbaru, you’re the only one who can’t clean but can cook, right? And not just barbecue.”

That’s a strong follow-up from Araragi-senpai.

So strong that Hitagi, who had taken Kanbaru along on our honeymoon, might have been seriously considering hiring her as a live-in housekeeper. If Shinobu was the adopted daughter, would Kanbaru be the babysitter?

That’d be quite the sitcom.

Putting it bluntly, it’d be a Full House.

Apparently, there’s a sequel called Fuller House as well… I haven’t seen it yet, but I definitely will someday.

“Well, to answer seriously, I want to be a sports doctor, which means that I would also be responsible for managing an athlete’s diet in some capacity. That’s why I’m currently working hard to learn a variety of dishes while I still can.”

That was a serious answer for sure. Even Hitagi wouldn’t think of forcibly taking her once-junior to America after hearing that. It was as if she had drawn a line that couldn’t be crossed.

In the strictest sense, managing nutrition should be a dietician’s job, but the sense of mission to learn the basics of cooking for oneself was admirable enough to look up to.

“Thanks to that, I’ve become a better cook, but as you said, my cleaning is a different story. The kitchen sink’s always overflowing with dishes and food scraps.”

“Don’t go expanding your territory, now.”

That remark caught me off-guard… Once the honeymoon is over and we return home, I must clean Kanbaru’s kitchen before leaving for America.

What a shame. I was impressed at first.

“Your sense of duty to clean up Kanbaru’s territory is impressive, Koyomi. I take back what I said before, perhaps with you around, there’s no need to hire a maid after all. We can handle meals with dining out and take-outs, can’t we?”

“Hey, Araragi-senpai, how about we put Araragi-senpai in a maid

outfit?”

“Regardless of whichever one of us were to wear it, adults don’t kid around, Kanbaru-kun.”

While leaving the cutting and skewering of the meat for the BBQ to the professional Kanbaru, it seems even I wouldn’t be without a job to do in this campsite. Following around Kanbaru, I’d earn my keep by diligently cleaning up dishes and food scraps.

“By the way, Koyomi, don’t you have to wake up Shinobu-san… I mean, Shinobu? There’s enough food prepared for everyone, after all.”

“Ahh, it’s alright. She usually only eats Mister Donut, anyway. Plus, the timing’s just right for me to let her suck my blood before heading to the Killing Stone.”

“I see. So, while it seems like an errand, you’re actually taking it pretty seriously, huh?”

Well, yeah.

After all, our opponent was an aberration older than Shinobu—you can never be too cautious, and there’s no guarantee that we won’t end up caught in some sort of fox trap.

Urban legends. Street gossip. Rumors in the wind.

Be it ghost tales or horror stories, at their core, they are all experiences of terror. I, Araragi Koyomi, might be a bit brazen in saying so myself, but I've accumulated quite the career in experiencing each of them.

It all began long ago with a hellish spring break where I discovered a peerless beauty missing her limbs in a back alley. Since then, I'd been split in half by a cat, beaten by a monkey, coiled by a snake, fawned over by a corpse doll, and almost swallowed by darkness.

The list goes on, without end.

Yet, even when compared to those horrifying encounters, my current experience was unparalleled—on my way to the Killing Stone.

It was unbelievably dark.

It was darker than the darkness that threatened to swallow me.

As I had told Hitagi, I let Shinobu drink my blood to enhance her vampirism at the campsite, and despite bolstering my physical strength, particularly my vision, it was still so dark that I could hardly see.

It was not the broken stone's magic.

Simply the absence of electric light at the historic site, and by this I came to realize just how dependent humans are on the Master Inventor Edison. The old saying, "an inch ahead is total darkness," couldn't be more apt, as in the dim light of my smartphone, serving as a makeshift lantern, I gingerly and cautiously moved forward. Though I had planned to briefly check the place and quickly return to the campsite, my pace had slowed considerably once I arrived here.

I couldn't walk without scuffing the soles of my shoes, always dragging my feet.

Nature's starlight could have sufficed, but I didn't have that. The

moment I left the tent, Hitagi had matter-of-factly warned me:

“Since the main event of stargazing is tomorrow, try not to look up at the sky today. I’ll be doing the same.”

My newlywed wife casually made such an outrageous request. I knew it was just a case of her worrying too much—the past her would have blindfolded me and taken me on a short drive. Instead, she had driven me to heart of the Killing Stone area in a rented minivan. The sky had transformed instantly and became completely overcast as soon as we disembarked in the parking lot.

Whatever happened to the divine grace of Hachikuji Daimyoujin?

“Expect anything, master. Even with my vision—and by that, I mean the undifferentiated vision of a young girl—I cannot see through this darkness.”

Shinobu, who had emerged from the shadows, spoke as she walked beside me. If we didn’t hold hands, we’d have lost sight of each other.

The fact that I was almost completely blinded reminded me of the Blind Snake Stone in this park alongside the Killing Stone, which Chief Kouga had instructed me about. And as the legend goes, or not necessarily because of it, there was a strong pungent smell.

Was it the smell of rotten eggs?

As someone who hardly ever cooks, I had never smelled a rotten egg—the legend of the Blind Snake Stone, by the way, goes as follows.

One day, a man saw a blind snake struggling and decided to make a nest for it out of pampas grass. In return, the snake made plenty of hot springs well up in that area—unlike the snake I know, this snake was a good one.

Just the fact that it didn’t come to kill humans made it a good snake, but what’s more, it was even repaying a favor. I’d love to make a nest for such a snake.

But, having only dabbled in internet knowledge, I hadn’t grasped what a yunohana (hot spring flower) really was—I thought it was a real flower. But now, I understood that it was something like a sulfur crystal.

I wasn’t like Oshino, but I recognized the importance of fieldwork—well, it would have sufficed to have been more diligent and

intensively researched yunohana as a keyword. But even so, this pungent odor that hit me squarely in the nose could only have been experienced firsthand.

It wasn't something you could simply sniff out.

I shouldn't be saying this so close to an onsen shrine, but as a university student, I had never been one for venturing to hidden hot springs, and the unfamiliar smell was pretty unsettling. It felt as if my vision had been stolen, as well as my sense of smell.

Hmm.

Too late now, but I definitely should have come here in daytime. My sense of convenience had taken precedence, and I had found myself here alone at night—an irreparable mistake. Shinobu had warned me that anything could happen, and now it seems I'd put myself in a position where it was more likely to.

The site itself was open 24 hours a day, but there was not a soul in sight, not even a hint of an insect.

On this late-night excursion, Kanbaru had also offered, "Maybe I can be of some help, so should we go together, Araragi-senpai?"

But I felt it was better to decline. The me of today, past my prime, was no longer capable of protecting someone else while fighting. I could barely protect my own and a little girl's life.

As for Hitagi, she was holed up in her tent, determined not to look up at the sky before the real deal, and was apparently planning to devote herself to her trading business using all the latest electronic gadgets I had never seen before.

No sooner had my wife withdrawn than this weather began…

Could she be the Sun Goddess Amaterasu?

Anyhow, it seems that both of us were the type to bring work along on our honeymoon. Well, the world of investing was such that you couldn't take your eyes off the screen even for a single day—or not even a single second. That said, I'm sure her junior—no, my friend Kanbaru, who had been in her life longer than me, would be in the middle of a belated bachelorette party right about now.

I had never had any friends to throw such a party for me, either in Japan or the US… the meaning of being single was different for us.

In high school, I used to boast that making friends would only weaken me as a human, but looking at Kanbaru, who went out for BBQs every week, I couldn't help but think that those who could make friends were strong at a fundamental level.

The more I became a part of society, the more I felt this to be true.

I wanted to return to the days when I believed that having no friends held value, but maybe Hanekawa had already realized this that spring break… in this sense, she had become far too intense after graduation.

As is apparent from the fact that she managed to win over a guy like me, the former class president was more suited to making friends than to creating organizations.

In both a good and a bad sense.

Her intensity as a human increased.

But she'd lost her human touch.

"…Phew."

In any case, remembering Hanekawa for a little helped me collect my thoughts. It was like my routine; whenever I felt shaken or even scared, I thought about Hanekawa.

That would instantly calm me down.

Relax; just darkness.

This wasn't some dramatic turn of events where I'd sense spiritual energy or be possessed by a supernatural creature… Though there were no people around, I was simply walking across a wooden bridge set up over a rocky area—in a hot spring resort?

It was a man-made bridge.

In other words, even without a single person around, human hands were still present—it was a normal tourist spot, after all. This place was atop a mountain that could be reached by a one-hour bus ride from the bullet train station—what would it do if I myself became the origin of a rumor?

I guess I'd better watch my step so that I don't stumble.

On the way here, I had stumbled upon countless posters that depicted

cute versions of the nine-tailed fox and Tamamo-no-Mae. Much like vampires, shape-shifting foxes had already become a part of human economic activity—don't be scared, this darkness was no different than walking with eyes closed.

Rather, I turned off the light on my smartphone and immersed myself in true darkness before resuming my steps.

"Well, you may think this to be cool of you, but 'tis seriously dangerous. Crossing a bridge all casual-like, and then stepping off the edge is no joke—you'll be injuring yourself. There's not a single stalk of grass beneath the bridge in this rocky place, master."

"As an investigator for the Hearsay Department, I can't always afford to play it safe. If anything, finishing up the sightseeing without incident is the best way to dispel the rumor."

"Aye, I see. I shall not meddle in your work matters."

"What the hell. Aren't you more than eager to butt in about everything else? Are you still sulking over not getting to join us for the barbecue?"

"Sulking? Nay, well—"

'*Tis not entirely untrue, I suppose,* Shinobu said somewhat hesitantly, her words lacking their usual sharpness—a peculiar display for a former vampire with razor-sharp fangs that could pierce through my neck in an instant.

I couldn't quite put my finger on what she was getting at, so I decided to express my gratitude before I forgot. "By the way, you were a big help."

I did have a childhood friend with whom our relationship had remained sour for almost two decades simply due to my forgetfulness in saying thanks.

"What are you referring to?"

"We didn't even talk about how it'd all go, but you were, how do I put this, very humble towards Hitagi. That, right there, was the mark of a six-hundred-year-old adult. I never imagined you'd support Hitagi like that, and I'm really glad that your first meeting managed to avoid a worst-case scenario-like conflict."

The topic might have been rather personal and serious for casual

conversation, but there was no need to continue delving into scary stories in such a foreboding place. This was one of the rare moments in this group trip when just the two of us could talk. So I figured we should face it head-on.

We had just barely seen a sign saying it was 240 meters to the Killing Stone, but honestly, it felt more like two kilometers. Maybe even as far as the moon.

“Hmph. Well, ‘tis only reasonable. Seeing as the lady in question is to be your partner, as a slave to you, she holds an equivalent level of power over me, as a master.”

“So you’re ranking us, like a pack of dogs…”

Not the best image to go by, but then… Where would my friend and my wife’s junior, Kanbaru, fit in the pecking order?

“I did have that one squabble with the monkey girl, and she did best me in the end. In a way, she may even be above you, master.”

“Above me, huh…? Looks like the relationship chart’s shaping up just as I imagined.”

A pyramid relationship chart it was.

Then, who was at the top? Gaen-san? No, maybe the nominator, Oshino?

“Specialists would be at the bottom—those lowly creatures failed to kill me even after centuries of trying.”

“I mean, there’s a difference between them. Gaen-san and Oshino wanted fo coexist, didn’t they? It was the vampire hunters like Dramaturgy who were really aggressive toward you.”

I was the one who had to fight them, though.

They were formidable opponents that I can’t imagine ever looking down on. Even knowing that those battles have shaped who I am today, I would never wish to face them again.

Wait, huh.

“Aye, regardless of the past, there’s no question that I’m at the bottom now—a powerless young lass. And this feels rather comforting.”

“Does it really?”

“Indeed—I feel much more at ease now than when I was being constantly challenged. In fact, I had almost forgotten until I talked to Death, but I became a vampire to rid myself of my charm in the first place.”

I recalled hearing that, as a matter of fact.

In an ancient European castle, or maybe in the mirror world.

I suppose becoming a vampire was precisely for the sake of forgetting that gift. Though her past before becoming a vampire seemed far more monstrous, the tale of “Princess Beauty” was magnificent.

To think that names like Lola or Acerola would be unimaginable to Shinobu now was far from a joke—her beauty brought destruction to entire nations. It was no laughing matter.

Even a careless, aesthetically-challenged man like me couldn’t help but desire to eviscerate myself when facing “her.”

There was a time when Hanekawa had insinuated as much, but it seemed fitting that during her time as Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, she had never used her innate vampire charm skill. Considering the secret of her birth, maybe it was for the best.

“If you had been able to use your Charm, you probably wouldn’t have been chased about so much. It’s funny how things don’t always go as planned, huh?”

“I’d say things actually turned out quite well. Just by not bringing about the end of the world, and by living such a long, frugal life until I met you, it seems fortuitous, no?”

It may have been a long life, but it was only frugal in recent years—to say I wasn’t happy to hear her say that would be a lie. Although it’s hard to believe my actions during spring break were flawless and the best—Hmm?

Something’s been bothering me for a while now.

Had my thinking become dull in the darkness?

Or had it become more sharp and sensitive? Unable to reach an answer to this plaguing question, I decided to share my vexation with her.

“But Shinobu, I think calling yourself a slave or the lowest of the low

won't be well-received in these modern times. Self-deprecation as a form of humor is losing its appeal. When you speak poorly of yourself like that, you might be insulting others who're struggling under similar circumstances, even if you don't mean to. It's like if I were to say, 'Oh no, becoming an FBI agent is no big deal, totally normal, really.' In doing so, I'd end up dishonoring my colleagues who are keeping my back."

"Need not keep your back, you are more likely to be shot right in the face."

Maybe it wasn't the best analogy.

A better one might be: if someone like me, who has no friends, constantly bemoans not having any, it might look as if not having friends is an absolute evil. Thus, inadvertently attacking everyone who has no friends—something like that.

Not like that was a great analogy either.

It's the worst thing I've ever heard.

But I don't know, I'd prefer it if I had no friends and wasn't allowed to complain about it… It'd still be better than the days when I was an asshole distancing myself from people.

"Fret not, master. No one else is like me—a vampire who has fallen into the role of a perverse lolicon's slave."

"Shinobu-san, being a lolicon is a no-go. An absolute no-go. It's not about the times; it's about a twenty-four-year-old being called a lolicon."

"I believe it would have been inappropriate even for a high school student."

"Not even gods can look like fifth-graders anymore. You never know how long you can remain a little girl."

"Hmm. So, is your proposal to legally adopt me and thereby legalize the arrangement? What a wicked idea."

No, that absolutely wasn't my intention… But in the course of having many conversations with many people, things got tangled.

Fundamentally, though, the issue at hand stemmed from the realization that I couldn't permanently put Shinobu's problems on the

back burner as I build a life with Hitagi.

“I feel it’s better to keep me on the back burner. Certainly better than being hung out to dry. The idea of turning me into Araragi Shinobu hardly has any meaning, as it were.”

“Why? If there’s even a hint of meaning to it, then there must be a point, right? Position-wise, it’d be better to raise you from the lowest level of slave. From what I’ve heard so far, your self-esteem is way too low.”

If I had to describe it in terms of feeling, it might be akin to a fast-footed track team member who can’t get serious about competing in school marathon events and ends up walking at the back of the pack. Like getting rusty when participating in general races, I guess.

While that may have been fine if it was just between me and her, once we became a trio, we couldn’t keep saying the same… And I doubt Hitagi would want a child slave.

“I wonder if she would want an adopted daughter, or if the tsundere girl—err, the lady of the house—even desires to become a mother in the first place.”

It wasn’t the kind of question a little girl would ask, but it was a sensitive topic even for an adopted child. I had never had this conversation before—let alone posed this question to Hitagi.

Hitagi’s enmity with her mother ran incredibly deep, and it’s hard to say that I fully comprehended the complex feelings she harbored toward the concept of motherhood.

In any case.

Senjougahara Hitagi went to great lengths to sever her ties with her mother. She even wished for and subsequently lost almost all her body weight. It was this mysterious—this complex turn of events that led to our fateful encounter. While it may be unwise to make a sweeping judgment on this, there was a primitive, skeptical aspect to viewing it all from a future perspective. In the end, it remains uncertain whether Senjougahara Hitagi’s recovery of memories of her mother was for the better or worse. This question seemed even more mysterious than the supernatural.

When I was eighteen, I remember Oshino saying something that I couldn’t quite grasp nor even pretend to understand. As I approached the age that Oshino was back then, in other words, as I became an

adult, I began to comprehend, if only slightly, what he was trying to convey.

Adults remain adults.

Parents remain parents.

While Senjougahara Hitagi plead to the crab, she also had another option, to plea to the crab or not—to sever her ties with her mother. This option, even if seemingly non-existent, it was there for her to take.

Much like an aberration or perhaps a god.

It was a choice she could have made.

Senjougahara Hitagi said with tears in her eyes that it was something she had to bear, something she could not forget, but looking back on it now, it was not something she had to bear at all, and if she could forget it, she would have been happier at least.

If asked whether forgetting everything, like Hanekawa, would bring happiness, I would say that's not quite right. But, it did not mean that "Senjougahara Hitagi" was the right answer either.

Just as adults will only ever be adults.

Children will only ever be children, nothing more—it was too much to bear and too deeply etched within her.

"In reality, she couldn't have managed a normal life with her debilitating disease of losing her weight. Maybe she couldn't have gone to university or worked for a foreign firm. So all she could do was remember, but I wonder what decision she would make today, with the person she's become."

"Whether she would make the decision an adult would? Had you done this to me, at the very least, I wouldn't be here like this."

"I've said before that even now: I still think that was the only choice I could've made with you back then. I can't just ignore the plight of a beautiful woman missing her limbs."

Perhaps it's even more true now that I've come of age. On top of my original, irrepressible personality, there was a sense of professional duty.

I was a servant not only in spirit but also in profession.

In the same vein, if I were to come across a high school girl struggling with her relationship with her mother, my first thought would now be to protect her. Regardless of whether or not I should step in, just as I did back in high school.

With my shoes off, if not barefoot.

“Kanbaru was once rejected by Senjougahara Hitagi… But now, as an aspiring doctor, another course of action, another development might be possible. I think even back then, Hitagi trusted doctors and nurses…”

“If that monkey girl had found me, what would’ve become of me?”

“With your limbs torn as they were, you would’ve been deemed an incurable patient and subjected to that ‘triage’ she talked about.”

It was by no means limited to Kanbaru.

What if someone other than myself had encountered the vampire on the brink of death? It was hard to imagine anyone else making the same foolish yet honest choice as me, at least not any typical adult.

“Y’know, originally, Hanekawa was the one who wanted to meet a vampire. If she had given her blood to you…”

“The world would have perished.”

As lightly as she said it, we’d borne witness to a similar outcome in a parallel world—if the fully-powered Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade and an equally powerful Hanekawa Tsubasa had formed a master-servant bond, one or two worlds wouldn’t be enough. Hundreds, if not thousands of worlds would perish. Their terrorizing “what-if” would pose a threat to the extinction of every parallel universe.

I wonder if this world, too, can remain safe forever.

“If it were Senjougahara Hitagi then? I think back in spring break, after she broke ties with Kanbaru and left Oikura’s protection, she’d have been at her sharpest…”

Still, was it my partiality to my dear wife that I thought she wouldn’t have abandoned a dying beauty?

“Perhaps, perhaps not If she were still as cold as ever, then we may have forged a strong partnership, excluding the cat girl, of course.”

However.

That would only hold true if the lady were to become a full-fledged vampire—she said, and then, Shinobu stopped in her tracks.

At first, I wondered why, but it seemed that while talking, we had arrived at the place where the Killing Stone was supposedly exhibited —nay, it couldn't be called an exhibit at all.

The stone simply sat there.

As it had for ages—eight hundred long years.

Just as the signboard of "240 meters ahead" had promised, it seemed we had finally reached our goal. One more step, and we were walking in complete darkness, taking a great leap of courage.

In my night vision mode, I was barely able to see it. There was no guide present, nor any illumination, so it was difficult to be certain.

There was at least a sign that read "Killing Stone," but still.

"There's no mistake. The ominous aura oozes from this broken stone."

"But isn't that just… the sulfur?"

According to Chief Kouga, the ill health and even death of small animals around the stone was not caused by some supernatural being, but by the sulfur being emitted.

In fact, as far as my night vision allowed me to see, I found only the desolated slabs of rock. And as Shinobu mentioned earlier, not a single stalk of grass in sight.

Although, like the legend of the Blind Snake Stone, the sulfur itself could be considered the product of an aberration. But at the end of the day, a stone is just a stone—or at least, that's what my high school experience would have had me believe. Then again, wasn't I the one who had made an ordinary rock the protagonist of a horror tale?

"This is more than a mere pebble produced by you, master. This, here, is a genuine, certified Killing Stone. Left abandoned on this gloomy mountain, with a name you cannot help but be haunted by: Killing Stone."

And she had a point. It may be personal bias, but the name Killing Stone had a greater impact on me than the nine-tailed fox or Tamamo-no-Mae. Because it contained the word "kill," it even surpassed my

predecessor Seishirou in its might. Come to think of it, I could almost feel the aura myself.

Could it really be that such a perfectly split stone was a natural occurrence? It almost appeared to have been cleanly cleaved by a mighty sword. But damn, the darkness made it near impossible to discern the scale of the thing.

It seemed at once both smaller and larger than I had imagined—either way, it threatened to swallow me whole.

On the other hand, no matter how perfect and idyllic the future Gaen-san may have envisioned, Nasu Town in Tochigi Prefecture lay beyond the jurisdiction of Naoetsu Police.

So, with a trembling heart, I carefully approached the historical site of the Killing Stone in the still of night. But to the locals, I was the suspicious outsider.

It might seem like I'd ventured across an ancient European castle, what with the way I'd been acting, but I just needed to backtrack a little and I'd find myself in a perfectly common residential neighborhood. It would be the worst if, instead of the stone, I were to become an urban legend.

So, I couldn't possibly commit the vandalism of climbing over a fence installed for safety and approach the Killing Stone. As a cop, I couldn't enter a restricted area without a warrant. Well, looking closely at the fence, there was a sign posted on it saying, "Please keep away for safety. Sulfur gas is present," which also made me hesitate.

"Ah, that might be a problem. I was hoping to bring back a tale about how the Killing Stone cracked but the nine-tailed fox didn't revive to my colleagues. But I might end up bringing back a horror story instead now."

So far, all I've known on this detour is fear. If I were to return to the campsite as is, I would definitely end up telling those two a souvenir story of how incredibly scared I was. As it stands, the already venerable and well-established rumor would be in danger of being officially endorsed by public institutions, and it would be unimaginable if rumors were to spread that the Killing Stone was being deemed dangerous by the FBI.

I'd been told by my dear wife not to look up at the sky if I can help it, but I found myself inadvertently gazing up at the heavens. Fortunately

or unfortunately, the Nasu Highlands sky was covered in even thicker clouds than when I last checked.

The moon was nowhere to be seen.

There was hardly any difference between the view when I was facing forward and when I was looking at the sky. It's fine for now, but what about tomorrow night? Was the weather different between Nasu Highlands and Oku-Nikko? They say mountain weather is fickle.

"If you absolutely insist that I adhere to the hierarchical order involving master and servant, I could break the Killing Stone into even smaller pieces and dispose of it with no trace left behind."

"No, it wouldn't do to spread a different rumor. Who knows what kind of legend will be born if a blonde little girl is seen practicing stone-splitting at a historical site at night?"

If such a terrifying story were to become established, it'd blow away my terrifying experience tonight.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

And a ghost story for a ghost story?

"Ah, I see. If one were to experience a scarier situation, it would render the rumor of the Killing Stone invalid."

"Right. It's like how ghost stories won't scare you if you have toothache. Thankfully, I owe my lack of cavities to you."

"I understand now."

Shinobu nodded with a knowing glance.

"Indeed, I recall that back in my heyday, I once tore off my leg below the knee due to unbearable pain from a broken pinky toe. I suppose it's quite similar to that."

"Mhm… that's also a way to deal with the pain, I guess."

Tearing off your own limb seemed to be a unique approach reserved for regenerating vampires. Akin to a lizard shedding its tail or surgically removing an affected area in medicine, I guess. At this point, it was becoming an unsettling preface.

"Fear not. We're not discussing tearing off your leg here."

“A little girl ripping off your leg in the middle of the night, that’d be a great ghost story. A brand new urban legend. What, are we starting a Hundred Ghost Stories right here? I bet any story told by you, the King of Aberrations, would be the embodiment of terror.”

But could even that surpass this real-life experience? I was the one who brought it up, but—was there a ghost story that could make me blurt out, “My apologies to the nine-tailed fox, but a Killing Stone’s got nothing on this,” after hearing it?

“Hmph… Not so much a ghost story as something I’d been meaning to discuss with you during this excursion. It could very well be scarier than any ghost story for you.”

“Ooh, exciting.”

“Perhaps even I won’t sleep tonight. Are you still pondering over that idea of yours, about binding me with your name instead of the aloha boy’s name that’s been shackling me all this while?”

“Yeah, I remember the two of us deciding that.”

“I don’t recall it being a mutual decision. It was almost entirely on you.”

A husband who rules the roost, are you? she said. Well, I can’t deny that I might have come across as a bit forceful in presenting the idea.

But so what?

Isn’t that water under the bridge?

“Water under the bridge or not, it’s not inherently a terrible idea. In the past, it would have been utterly impossible for you to have sealed me away with merely your name, but now you are practically a specialist of sorts. With the support of a veteran practitioner, you could place an even stronger seal on me.”

“A stronger seal? I have no intention of doing that, but—”

I didn’t want to rely on Oshino’s name forever, and if anything, as a plan of mine, I hoped to raise her sense of freedom, self-affirmation, even just a little—but would the “veteran practitioner” mentioned here be Gaen-san or Chief Kouga?

“I thought that being controlled by me might be preferable to being controlled by Oshino.”

“That seems kind-hearted of you, but it’s quite the dangerous thinking, as well. You criticize slavery when it’s to others, but it’s fine when you’re the one with control.”

I hadn’t expected to be called out like that, but yes, I realized it was a self-righteous idea. I didn’t want to admit it to the vampire who creates thralls, but when I paused to think it over, I found that over her six-hundred-year semi-life, Shinobu had created only two thralls, including myself.

Maybe from the beginning, this vampire was opposed to the idea of enslavement.

“You’re correct. In my case, before I became a vampire, I had witnessed Death’s own thralls. Having been shown such a forceful master-servant relationship and having it ingrained in my subconscious, I may have developed an aversion to it.”

Seishirou and I, we may have been unwillingly created as slaves—no, there was no doubt that we both were vampires born out of emergency escapes. At the very least, we weren’t slaves born out of Shinobu’s free will.

“If you value humanity, you might think that instead of transferring control by binding with a name, it’d be more reasonable to liberate slaves…”

“To be honest, I’m not entirely jesting about this matter either. I have no intention of blaming your sense of ethics, and it’s a fact that, thanks to you, I was able to end my life on the lam. Since my identity has changed many times before, it might be a little amusing to be bound by your name. I rather like the name Oshino Shinobu, but I have to admit, there’s something about it that makes me feel that aloha boy decided it on a whim.”

While I didn’t think it was entirely arbitrary, I couldn’t deny the feeling that wordplay had played a role in the decision.

“But master, I believe it’s a foul idea to make me your ‘daughter.’ That isn’t simply going too far, it’s running amok.”

“Hm? Really? It sounded really nice to me. But I don’t plan to decide this alone. As wicked as I may be, I’m not self-righteous.”

“I believe they’re similar, those two.”

“But I’ll admit there’s a problem with the way I’m going about it. I’ll

make sure to get your approval, and obtain Hitagi's consent according to the proper procedures. No surprises, no casual conversations in the car."

To not treat her like a servant or a slave, but to take her in as a foster daughter, I think it was pretty progressive for our time… Not running amok, but running side by side.

"So, maybe there's no need to bother Chief Kouga or Gaen-san about changing your name. Oikura can handle it."

"'Tis a tragedy for that girl to find someone like you waiting for her at the end of her search for safety—worse than being beaten by her parents."

After completely denying the foundation of my friendship with Oikura, Shinobu shook her head and pressed further, "Perhaps I should speak more clearly so that my message gets across?"

"I am not negating your philanthropy, no. As I've said numerous times, I have been saved by it, and it has brought me joy. I am even allowed to be lazy because of it, and it has guaranteed me a comfortable retirement. I may look different to you, but no matter how my name changes, I will always be the same. Hence, this isn't my problem—it's your lady's problem."

"Hitagi's?"

Shinobu had taken a humble approach to their first meeting, leading me to think that it had all gone off without a hitch… I guess not so much? In fact, I suddenly remembered something Hitagi had said back when she had met Hachikuji: she couldn't stand children.

She had even boasted that they should all just die—a line that, while typical of prime Senjougahara Hitagi, was still quite extreme. Not that I wish to criticize her past statements by digging them up, and I had thought she'd completely conquered that weakness at some point, but I realized there hadn't been any situations where she was around children since then.

Even as someone who values home and family, Hitagi had no connection with Hachikuji whatsoever.

"Hmm, there certainly was a palpable sense of tension between us, but I didn't feel any animosity. She didn't seem to want to kill me."

"What do you take my wife for?"

“Well, she used to be quite the character back then.”

That’s right.

That classmate of ours was exceptionally aggressive against everyone, junior Kanbaru and peer Hanekawa alike. But compared to those times, she had morphed into a remarkably easygoing and affable person.

“There was a side of me that wanted to take advantage of her affability and just let things unfold naturally with you. But now, I think it’s better to have a proper plan in place.“

“Ah, and thanks to this plan, I’ve come to understand that it is indeed best not to place me as your adopted child. Or even force me to be Araragi Shinobu.”

“What are you talking about? That’s not what you were saying earlier. Weren’t you on the Araragi side?”

“It’s not about taking sides. For you, it may be a matter of personal experience and inherent nature, something you’ve grown so accustomed to that you no longer reflect upon it. But, after our conversation today and after discovering her true intentions, I’ve found that the lady of the house is still unaware of this. And to become a family without knowing about it would be impossible—or rather, if she knew, it would be even more impossible.”

“……?”

Her true intentions?

Despite the frank prelude, her words were rather ambiguous anyway. She spoke them like they were stuck between her molars.

“Molars, you say? More like fangs, perhaps.”

“Hmm?”

“Speaking of, how was the barbecue?”

Wait, the conversation just shifted gears.

Or was this some surreal ghost story?

“Well, it was pretty good… I’ve never had the chance to try this style of dining, even in America, but it’s a lot of fun. The campfire brings our spirits up, and it might have something to do with Kanbaru’s

impressive cooking skills. It was charred just right, not just the meat, but the vegetables as well."

Though phrases like "life is half-lived without food" were cliché and leave a bit of a bad taste in my mouth, it struck me that maybe, I should have been doing things like this in high school or university.

I think I had been stubbornly refusing to experience the fulfillment so many others had. Maybe that stubbornness, not just barbecue, was what had been really detrimental to my life.

"Come on, did you really want to eat too? Well, there's a theory that family starts by having meals together, so—"

Tut, tut, tut, Shinobu quickly cut me off, wagging her theatrical finger at me. Then, with a contrasting seriousness on her face, she said, "'Tis fine for you to eat your meat and veggies; is it fine for me to eat humans, too?"

Really.

Would you share a table with someone like her?

"……"

My apologies to the nine-tailed fox, but—a Killing Stone's got nothing on this.

I could ramble on about this, but it wouldn't amount to anything more than a pathetic excuse at this point. But I swear to God, I swear to Hachikuji, it's not that I've forgotten—I'd even swear to Hanekawa if I must.

Just as Shinobu said, the incident was a primal encounter for me that transcended even the most horrifying of experiences. Spring break had influenced me more profoundly than any prenatal education could have. Not even the Weight Crab, no one could take away that memory from me—and really, who could blame me for not wanting to fight the league of vampire hunters ever again after living through that?

Now, here I am, six years later. I can't deny that both my resolve and commitment to Shinobu have grown lax—I should have devoted my entire life to her but it seems, at some point, it had all become halfhearted.

Maybe it wasn't Shinobu's seal that had weakened.

Maybe it was my oath to her.

Ah, yes. It's as clear as day: common sense, a rule, a prerequisite, the equality under the law. It's the law of nature, the ecosystem, the food chain, the pyramid.

Vampires feed on humans, and humans are their prey.

They suck their blood, bite into their flesh, crush their bones, swallow their organs, chew on their brains—devouring their very souls.

They trample on existence.

Of course, there are various opinions on this, and not every vampire is a gourmet glutton like Deathstopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master. A European castle had taught me that vampires have individualities—but ultimately, humans are nothing more than food for them.

Just as we eat meat and vegetables, vampires eat people.

Like wild beasts; their very existence is enough to pose a significant

threat and inspire fear. It's not for no reason that they take center stage in horror tales and their legends themselves are eccentric.

It's only natural to be afraid of them, and there's no helping that.

But in the case of Shinobu, she went beyond the mere act of eating a human—Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade did not just eat people.

She *devoured* them.

Right before my eyes.

Ravenously, greedily, voraciously.

She feasted, savoring the taste of the human flesh.

It was precisely because of this that I, on that spring break, broke away with "her" decisively and, despite being a servant myself, I raised my rebellion against my master and engaged in a fierce battle with the King of Aberrations on the grounds of Naoetsu High School.

I could not forgive her for eating humans.

I could not forgive her.

"……"

That's right.

For instance, even if we intellectually know that lions and tigers attack humans, once we've actually witnessed them doing so, we are unlikely to ever again see them as simple objects for observation at the zoo.

Similarly, if we were ever to be attacked by a wild dog, we would no longer be able to consider them as friends of mankind. There was a world of difference between dying at the hands of a wild boar in the mountains and in the maw of a bear.

Even though there may be legitimate reasons for culling bears that have attacked humans, such as the fact that they have developed a taste for human flesh, could it be that a deep and visceral repulsion forms the undercurrent for such actions?

Unforgivable, isn't it? Isn't it more frightening than anything else?

Those predators.

The ecological pyramid in the food chain.

So, our desire for punishment should be exceptionally strong as a result.

"……"

At least, that was what my high school self had perceived. Six years later, now an adult, that perspective had undoubtedly experienced an update.

It had changed.

Back when I was seventeen, I felt utterly unforgiving and was overcome with anger, but now, at twenty-four, I must admit.

I had forgiven quite a bit, Shinobu, who ate a man in front of me.

Somewhere along the way, I'd forgiven her.

That anger, that feeling of, let's call it hatred, that resentment, honestly, didn't last… Since Spring Break, I've had many experiences, met many people, and learned of many strange phenomena.

Since becoming a cop, I've dealt with tragic and baffling cases, as well as cases that made me want to turn my eyes away in despair for humanity—and, the memory of a person being eaten in front of me could never fade. But it's only fair to admit that back then, as a high school student, I was maybe too fastidious.

Conversely, now I am tainted.

I forgive people more easily than I used to. I realized that I myself was no saint. I've grown tired of remaining angry, and I've realized the futility of that anger. I've grown tired of constantly feeling sad, understanding that sadness won't go away just by grieving. It could be that I've become kinder, but does that mean I've become kinder to myself, who continues to be wounded?

"Humph. Don't fall into despair so readily, my master. It's hard to know how to console you when you're like this. I would rather praise you. This is because you have managed to tame me, a monster, so skillfully over these six years. You have trained me, a beast, and now I see no reason to feed on humans. If I had to say, I prefer vegetables or donuts, Mister Donut in particular."

"……"

“But, even so, it does not erase the past where I’ve fed on humans. In your professional terms, my criminal record is not expunged. I’m still in the midst of a suspended sentence. And it’s not just that one who I ate before your eyes; there have been a considerable number of humans I’ve devoured over the past six hundred years—though not as many as Death.”

A monster.

Could she be welcomed into a family as a daughter?

“You can do it, no? It’s what you’ve always done. I believe you will. There’s no doubt about that—but what about the mistress? With how she innocently became excited over topics such as Turtle Soup and the marshmallow test, could it be that she doesn’t even know that I eat humans?”

“S-She likely doesn’t know. I haven’t told her.”

Aside from the specialists, the only one who might know about this was Hanekawa for being involved in that spring break. Well, I haven’t explicitly told her, but maybe Kanbaru might have had a hunch as well… She had some connections to specialists. What she hesitated to say at the gate where we met might have been just that.

Although you may have forgotten—I’ll say it again, I haven’t. It’s just that a lid was placed on my consciousness. I had become accustomed to not thinking about it. To glossing over it.

When I started dating Hitagi, I promised not to keep secrets about aberrations. But, there were still things I could and couldn’t discuss—convenient lines drawn, even for me. Wasn’t the reason I couldn’t tell anyone that I was protecting the man-eating Shinobu because it weighed on my conscience?

“Nevertheless, she is your spouse. She has experienced many tragedies, and her spirit is firmly settled. Perhaps she has the capacity to accept a weakened, powerless me. If you say so.”

“……”

“Well then, even so, it’s no more than a personal matter between you and her. Right now, the idea might seem unthinkable, but someday the two of you may be blessed with a child. How then will you explain this to the child? That their ‘big sister’ is a cannibal?”

One might wonder if this was some sort of drama about a criminal

family. As a police officer, it's an issue I couldn't ignore. As if the decision wasn't already difficult enough, there were cases where choice was nonexistent—children can't choose their parents or their siblings.

Furthermore, as a parent or prospective parent, there is no avoiding the dangers that come with it. That is to say, the possibility that your own child could become prey for a vampire. If it were someone else's problem, I would certainly offer fair warning.

Because I trust Shinobu as she trusts me, I foolishly believed that a tragedy like that could never happen. It's just that… welcoming a monster into my family was not an easy task.

I carry this sin with me.

Without any surprises or casual skirting around the subject, if I were to formally bring it up, Hitagi might indict me for that sin. But if I may use a clichéd phrase—

Our unborn child would be innocent of all blame.

"See? 'Tis impossible for you to adopt me as a daughter, to become family. Whether you try to tame me, neuter me, domesticate me, or enslave me, a beast will always be a beast. You've done well to even treat me as a pet, when that alone would be inherently dangerous."

"…Shinobu."

"Correct, I am Shinobu. Oshino Shinobu. Do not involve her—the mistress, or your future child."

Kaka.

She laughed, like a mischievous spirit.[22]

"I shall lurk within your shadow and watch over you. I have no intention of joining your household, nor do I wish to become a part of your family. Being a slave is sufficient for me. Quietly watching over your growth from the shadows is an enjoyable way to pass the time—along with, perhaps, witnessing the development of your children with the mistress."

In the face of my own thoughtlessness, and, indeed, my shamefulness, I could do little but fall silent. It wasn't a silence of acceptance, however. I tried to squeeze out even a single word, but even such muttered pleas found themselves locked away, as if sealed by the

heavens.

“Ah?”

Suddenly, a large raindrop struck the nape of my neck, right at the site of a vampire’s bite. With a force that felt as if I’d been struck.

“A raindrop—Rain?”

From there, everything happened in the blink of an eye.

From the completely overcast night sky of the Nasu Highlands, torrential rain fell like a barrage—a poet might have remarked that just as our hearts weep, so does the sky. Unprepared and without an umbrella, my only choice was to drag myself away from the Killing Stone.

Oh, what misfortune it is to be getting drenched in rain at a place like this—or, actually, it might have been a convenient rain for me, at least a part of me thought of it that way. After all, it created the perfect excuse to not continue this unbearable and terrifying “ghost story” any further—however, it was a rain so strong it could ruin the entire trip.

“A moment ago, there was a small shelter with a roof just over there. For now, let us weather the storm there, master,” said the soaked Shinobu, before quickly retreating into my shadow—a shelter?

Had there been one?

Maybe it was only invisible to me.

Even if it weren’t night, even if it weren’t a downpour, I couldn’t have seen anything.

The Fox's Wedding.

It seems to refer to what is also called a sunshower—when rain falls while the sun is shining. While the sky over Nasu Highlands was cloudy tonight and so wouldn't exactly fit this definition, the feeling of "something being off" was similar to the Fox's Wedding, considering the clear weather during the day.

It was as if we had been cast down from a sky-reaching, delightful honeymoon to the ground below. Maybe this was also what prompted the thought of rain—the weather forecast had been entirely off, and apparently even Hachikuji's prayer hadn't reached this mountain.

Mountain weather was fickle, much like the hearts of people—or it could be more accurately described as utterly shallow.

Shallow and thin.

Thin and weak.

I couldn't believe me. It was such a huge blunder that it made me want to hang myself.

I had called it Fox's Wedding, but now I felt as though I were being doused in cold water by a nine-tailed fox, reminding me to cool my head.—Thanks to Shinobu, anyway, the story of the Killing Stone had become a minor concern, but now our honeymoon was also ruined.

The one saving grace was that I, who hadn't given any thought to this point, hadn't tried to surprise Hitagi with my thoughtless planning or casually proposed adoption in the car—at least in that sense, I hadn't made any mistakes, and there was no way to express my gratitude to Oikura and Kanbaru.

As for Oikura, fundamentally, she would reject all of my proposals, and she wasn't even aware of Shinobu's existence as of now, so it wasn't that she knew the outcome and stopped the surprise… Still, my attitude towards her was always one of gratitude.

It's common to seek advice from someone when you want their

support, but when I wanted to be challenged, I would turn to Oikura for advice… well, not really.

Imagine if, due to some bizarre twist of fate, I had brought up the suggestion of adoption—that would have forced the indomitable Hitagi into a most unexpected decision. She's always possessed an astonishingly speedy knack for making choices and decisively seeing them through since high school, and now, as she thrives in the fast-paced world of trading, her alacrity might have only grown stronger.

It could have possibly led to a swift divorce.

Naturally, an enthusiastic agreement could have been a possibility as well… Regardless, I never intended to resolve her complex issues—and possibly even trauma—surrounding motherhood by having her adopt Shinobu.

Purely a moment of childish whimsy, the idea that we could all live happily together, despite the radical difference between accepting the existence of a vampire and becoming family with one.

This realization had eluded me.

Driven by guilt at having potentially erased her family name by adopting the modern practice of a surname-sharing couple, I had donned the role of a progressive groom. I arrogantly clung onto the pride of being a man whose values reflected today's norms, a man who respected police regulations and moral obligations on the international stage, who knew he could no longer carry on brawling and fooling around with his sisters, a man who kept the company of adult friends who share a staunch dislike for the immature tastes of fifth-grade girls.

However, at the crux of it all, I was still Araragi Koyomi, a relic of the bygone Heisei era.

I tolerated the eating of people.

So, I tolerated murder.

It's an antiquated mindset reminiscent of a nefarious villain who, without any explanation whatsoever, becomes a comrade-in-arms by the next season.

"……"

But that doesn't mean it's right to let Shinobu literally live a life in the

sun, either. I just couldn't accept that.

A crime is a crime, whether it's committed by a beautiful woman or a cute little girl, it should never be forgiven. They should be punished for life, and should never become happy, let alone join the ranks of our allies. To consider their families and clans guilty and deserving of punishment as well might seem rather old-fashioned in terms of a worldview, don't you think?

Yes, I admit that I am defending Shinobu.

I am indeed defending her.

It may sound nice to say that I am defending a powerless vampire, but in criminal law terms, this is tantamount to concealing a criminal, tampering with evidence, and can be considered complicity if Shinobu were to accidentally destroy the world—in a parallel universe, that is.

I might even become a principal offender.

After all, if a pet bites someone, it's the owner's responsibility.

If anything, I was in a position where I could issue forceful commands to Shinobu, and there's no knowing when I might cross the line of the human world's rules—who's to say I won't resort to underhanded tactics when things don't go my way, or when I get frustrated with the world, or when I just want to cheat the system? What guarantee is there that I won't bulldoze my way through such situations?

In high school, I did that… I took advantage of Shinobu's immortality and, eventually, was sliced to pieces by Gaen-san as a repercussion.

Gaen-san, who had accumulated such countless experiences, assured me that Shinobu would never destroy the world again and that, despite my own limitations, I would not repeat the same mistake. Maybe that is what one might call an adult's judgment.

The all-knowing big sister.

Her junior colleague, Oshino, was probably aware of this when he bound Shinobu—a way of dealing with a sinner, neither by judgment nor by forgiveness but by giving her a second chance.

I had thought of them as a group of moratorium specialists who were not quite grown up—wandering middle-agers in Hawaiian shirts or young leaders with bold fashion—but actually, they were quite admirable after all.

Incidentally, during spring break, Hanekawa Tsubasa didn't openly state this to me but seemed to have a way of thinking like, "humans eat meat and vegetables, so it's only natural that vampires eat humans too."… Reaching that level of understanding must be the realm of enlightenment.

A second chance for sin.

No, if calling it a sin was one-sided, maybe it was more fitting to say, a second chance for the damaged.

And I believe Shinobu is doing a wonderful job with the second chance she had been given. Considering her past six hundred years, six years of confinement may seem insignificant, but, far from being biased, I can say with utmost certainty that she has been a model prisoner. Nevertheless, if we were to once again force her back into the shadows for the crime of eating a human, wouldn't that be in defiance of double jeopardy, legally speaking?

Second chance, or double jeopardy—Good grief, I've really become entrenched in the thinking of law enforcement.

In high school, when I felt so passionately about my freedom and being liberated from my restrictions. I could say that I couldn't forgive the unforgivable and, in fact, didn't. I could declare the wrong to be wrong and the different to be different. At most, I just couldn't admit I didn't know what I didn't know.

With an omnipotent sense of self, I judged the irrational.

Without any authority.

Now, I can no longer face criminals without considering the circumstances, the backstories, or the environment and customs that have shaped them. It wasn't just a side effect of aging but the product of years of professional training.

In spite of the unsympathetic and flagrant acts they commit, I still believe that even the most heinous criminals deserve at least a moment's consideration… One of the reasons I became a police officer, and a big one at that, was to capture that detestable conman with my own hands. But I was no longer driven by hatred and resentment to arrest that man.

I wanted to see justice done, to serve society.

Though apprehending the conman remains my objective, it's no longer

a burning desire—I now understand that the man had his reasons, circumstances, and motives, and the situation wasn't entirely black and white. Regrettably, seen from another angle, the conman who brought about the downfall of the Senjougahara family could also be viewed as a savior, a fact that Hitagi herself couldn't deny.

While I may be far from comprehending predation as the natural order of things, like Hanekawa did, maybe blaming others for what they can't control through their own efforts was a warped sense of ethics—such as condemning those who eat meat as uncivilized or lamenting the consumption of vegetables as unfair.

We enjoy a casual cup of coffee in the workplace without sparing a thought for whether it's fair-trade. We use smartphones that have rare metals built into them, mined by child laborers who have been coerced and exploited. I am not innocent, and no one can claim they are.

Ah, so that's it.

I bet Kanbaru understands these feelings far better than I do—she, who nearly drowned in love and wished to the monkey paw.

Perhaps her aspiration to become a doctor was not only borne from noble sentiments for her late friend, but also from a desire for atonement. Whether I forgive her for the thrashing I received at the hands of the monkey paw she wished to probably didn't matter.

In comparison, I felt as though my ramblings were like the superficial wisdom of an adult, and all I was doing was defending Shinobu with every means at my disposal.

I've listed many examples, introduced numerous perspectives, and attempted to put them into context, but still, the idea of eating people seems like a line crossed.

Even when compared to fraud, violence, child labor, and murder… I may have transformed into a vampire during spring break, but not to the point of wanting to eat people. I averted that conflict at the very last moment.

I didn't even desire to drink blood.

The instinctual disgust for such an incomprehensible craving is probably insurmountable and as strong as the desire for food.

Shinobu said that she no longer desires to eat people, but how much

torment did she go through to arrive at that point, then?

In essence, I thought I understood the extent to which I'd been pushing Shinobu to restrain herself, but I had absolutely no clue. Despite this, I didn't bear any significant demerits and played the role of a guardian—no, more like a probation officer.

Observing keenly with my tunnel vision.

The very idea of adopting her seems laughable at best with such a mindset. In fact, it would be nothing short of reckless to bind her under the Araragi name. How could I have possibly thought that was a nice idea?

Ah, I see it now.

It just dawned on me.

It finally became clear to me why the specialist Oshino Meme had bound the nameless Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade with his own name.

If it was all about making me, the very culprit who had allowed her to survive as a vampire, take responsibility for my actions, Oshino could have bound the aberration using my name since then.

Considering I would eventually have no choice but to use my shadow as a coffin, that would have made much more sense. However, it was in fact the complete opposite.

It was precisely because he was an outsider.

Only a third party could have bound the King of Aberrations.

Sure, binding her with my name might have made the seal more robust, but when the key to the lock lies within the family, the seal is rendered useless.

It's similar to the sense that an alibi from a family member cannot be trusted. If I were to put it in medical terms, like Kanbaru did, it would be akin to the rule that doctors can't perform surgery on their relatives.

It goes without saying that police officers are also not allowed to investigate cases involving their own family.

If we were to become family as a result of this bond, the situation would become even more complicated. As a professional and a third

party who was neither a relative nor a parent nor a child, Oshino, who was wandering somewhere unknown to me, was still able to keep her in check.

The significance of changing her name was immense.

Uncannily so.

It was precisely because she was now Oshino Shinobu, not Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, that I found myself willing to forgive her. Despite my words claiming otherwise, my actions betrayed the truth that I did.

Had her appearance changed without the name, maybe I could not have conveniently justified my feelings… If I really think about it, it seems everything was dancing in the palm of his hand.

Even after eighteen years—or rather, six.

To this day, I remain unable to surpass the machinations of Oshino Meme. I'm certain that even my current state, holding my head in my hands at a free stop in the Nasu Highlands Killing Stone site on my honeymoon, had been foreseen by the man in a Hawaiian shirt ever since spring break.

And the rain showed no signs of letting up.

“Oh, at long last, Araragi-senpai has returned! Though I was not the least bit worried about a man of your stature, I hadn’t imagined your return would be this delayed! You consistently exceed all expectations —it’s no wonder you’re the object of my admiration!”

In the parking lot of the campsite, a figure in a raincoat awaited. I tensed up momentarily, half-expecting it to be the Rainy Devil. But though not too far off the mark, it turned out to be Kanbaru Suruga in a raincoat.

Having sought shelter from the weather near the Killing Stone rest area, the rain, which seemed as though a bucket had been tipped over, showed no signs of stopping even in the morning. With no other choice, I dashed out of the Killing Stone site, drenched to the bone, and found myself reluctantly clambering into Hitagi’s minivan in my sodden state.

The sky remained heavily overcast, but when dawn broke, the surroundings were no longer shrouded in darkness, to my surprise. Right there, I found an astonishingly large number of Jizo statues.

In a way, their surprising presence felt more impactful than the broken stone itself, and they might have been watching over me as I camped in the wild.

As I hurried back through the rain across the bridge I had come to, I took a look at the signboard and it seemed that this historic site was also linked to the Limbo of Infants.[23]

It reminded me of the place where Hachikuji had once fallen.

Now that I thought about it, the field of stones did resemble a riverbed, and maybe the Jizo statues had some history to them—their number was far beyond the Kasa Jizo of the old fairy tale, more akin to the Five Hundred Arhats. But, I, for one, wanted an umbrella hat.[24]

I tried to make use of the drying feature in the minivan on the way back, but alas, this wet rat of a person (me) couldn’t be completely dried in time.

“As expected, you’re pretty well-prepared, Kanbaru. The weather forecast said it’d be sunny, but you brought a raincoat.”

“Well, it’s a no-brainer when camping—even if forget your wallet, never forget your raincoat! Where’s Shinobu-chan?”

I glanced at the empty child seat as I was asked and promptly replied, “In my shadow.” And then, I immediately asked back, “What about Hitagi?”

“I assume Araragi-senpai was up late tracking the movements of overseas markets to make it look like she was busy, probably waiting for the two of you to come back. But, since we’ve got something planned for tomorrow night, I urged her to go and get some rest.”

“I see. Sorry for causing you trouble. You should have gone to sleep too… What will we do for breakfast? With all this rain, it doesn’t look like we can eat outside.”

“It might not be the most nutritious, but how about some freshly-baked pizza for breakfast?”

“Ah, sounds great.”

Pizza, much like BBQ, was something far removed from my everyday life. I’ve never even ordered it for delivery. There’s something about it —along with alcohol—that feels like an event for people who have families or friends.

And maybe that’s the allure in it.

But no matter how much I ponder, my stomach continues to grumble.

“But wait… were there any stone ovens in this glamping facility? I don’t remember seeing anything like that in the pamphlet…”

As I recall, we chose this facility after weighing several options, prioritizing the richness of outdoor activities over other amenities like the stone oven. With this rain, all the outdoor activities we were looking forward to have gone down the drain, as you can tell, so our choice turned out to be completely wrong.

“Yes, last night after it started raining, I thought it would continue till today, so I took the initiative after putting Araragi-senpai to bed.”

“It sounds like she’s a baby.”

“I built a stone oven using materials at hand.”

“You’re doing outdoor activities alone!”

She’s not just a camper but a survivalist.

As expected, my sister’s admiration is for good reason.

Survival skills are always necessary, no matter where you go.

So, had she been waiting for me to return without leaving her tent, or maybe wearing that raincoat for the purpose?

Eh? A stone oven, she can make that?

“Of course, it would’ve been impossible to do it alone, so I gathered friends from the nearby tents, pooled our knowledge and tools, and built the stone oven under a shelter. As the one who proposed this idea, I was given the honor of using it first. Araragi-senpai, if you’re not tired, how about making some pizza together for a bit of fun?”

“You’ve accomplished in my short absence something I could never do in my entire life.”

The part I can’t do is “gathering friends and pooling knowledge and tools.” I always try to do everything alone, and decide everything on my own, which is a bad habit.

It’s a habit that could make me disliked.

There are many things I need to think and reflect on, but at the very least, maybe I can cooperate with my junior to make some pizza.

“Still, a stone oven… It seems that my life is full of stones.”

“I learned from the family who helped me build it that Tochigi Prefecture is famous for its stone deposits. If we have some extra time, they recommend we visit the Oya History Museum.”

“Interesting. What’s so special about it?”

“Apparently it has an underground space that resembles a temple—which is actually a quarry.”

As we continued discussing the mysteries of Tochigi, I used the folding umbrella Kanbaru had brought to shield myself from the rain as we moved from the parking lot.

Under a shared space for campers that served as a makeshift roof, there stood a stone oven, seemingly built out of haste, which certainly

wasn't there yesterday.

Human ingenuity never ceases to amaze me.

Or maybe it's just our relentless dedication to food…

"The challenge now is finding ingredients for the pizza, but I managed to secure some from the headquarters. Since they had some bread-making materials, so we should be able to use that."

"Wow, you can make pizza dough with breadcrumbs?"

"Oh, Araragi-senpai, have you never dabbled in cooking at all?"

While she stared in disbelief, I, without pause, shifted occupations from a Hearsay Department cop to a pizza chef. I can't deny how exhausted I was, but it was mainly mentally.

Thanks to Shinobu sucking my blood in advance, I was well-prepared for any unforeseen predicaments at the Killing Stone, and so my physical exhaustion was minimal. Spending the night in the rest area didn't cause any pain or exhaustion; in fact, I didn't even feel sleepy.

It's true that I utilized this peculiar physical trait to overcome university entrance exams and national civil servant exams, but it wasn't without a sense of unfair advantage.

"While your humility is commendable as always, I must disagree with your sentiment. After all, you have your fair share of risks to shoulder, Araragi-senpai, and doesn't that balance the scales?"

"Risks, you say? More often than not, I feel like I'm cheating my way through life."

"True! To live with a eight-year-old blonde girl every single day and night is quite the cheat. I envy you, actually."

"Well, it was supposed to be a risk, but…"

The risk, however, had transformed into one of my greatest advantages… a case of having my cake and eating it too.

"Maybe some cosmic force shaped it like this."

"Shaped? As in shapewear?"

"Why, do you think I wear that kind of stuff?"

My figure is always in shape—thanks, in part, to the vampirism.

“Ah, protagonist’s privilege?”

“Well, that would have been nice. But no, I mean something more mundane… when you’re in a consistently unlucky or dangerous situation, you might try to convince yourself that you’re actually happy with it, just to give yourself a sense of mental stability. Think of it as a sort of blissful ignorance… for you, it would be like feeling at ease in your messy room.”

“That’s quite an apt analogy, but it feels somewhat inappropriate. Aren’t you uncomfortable with the thought, Araragi-senpai, of thinking about Shinobu-chan in the same way as my cluttered room?”

Whipping up the pizza dough with an efficiency that belied the state of her living space, Kanbaru posed the question.

“So, am I right in guessing that you had a bit of a scuffle at the scene of the Killing Stone?”

Remarkably perceptive, that one.

I wasn’t trying to look depressed and seek consolation—but, absolutely, the lead-up had been meticulously prepared before the honeymoon departure.

I had laid the trap.

“My bond with Shinobu has deepened, more than ever. We talked about how we should be with each other and all. But… a little obstacle came up, concerning making her our adopted daughter. I realized what you were trying to say.”

“It was presumptuous of me. I should’ve just said traveling to Nikko was fine, and practiced the principle of see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil.”

“No, no, you’ve done good as a junior. Both to me and to Hitagi. It might be difficult to say, but you hinted at it well… You spared me from making a dangerous proposal in the car.”

I can’t be certain how much thought Kanbaru put into stopping me—like an out-of-control trolley—and with what intentions, but I feel it was a wise decision.

We really dodged a bullet. Seriously.

“You never know, if you had proposed, Araragi-senpai might’ve easily consented. She was, after all, quite exceptional at adoring cute things back in junior high.”

“You’re talking about the time when she wore a cat disguise and led the legion, right?”

“Can’t it also be said that it’s because of acting that one can expose their true nature without embarrassment or fear? Like how myself as the Rainy Devil could scream out my true feelings.”

Kanbaru took off and folded her raincoat, saying this—although it’s debatable whether “folded” is the appropriate term for something she crumpled so small—, and true enough, she might have a point.

Ironically, since they think this isn’t their true self, people can voice their true feelings without remorse. This rationale might also apply to stage performers and actors who reveal their innermost feelings. They could channel emotions they wouldn’t normally express, or whisper love lines they’d hesitate to say aloud—as long as it’s all part of the act, they could shamelessly speak their minds.

Because of fiction.

It hides the truth.

“With Hitagi, the length of time spent pretending made it unclear what her true feelings were, even for herself. Not just middle school, but much of her high school time too seemed to be just acting… The noble heiress period might also be called her true feelings, though.”

“Ah, the times when you were at the mercy of her whims were lovely to think about now, weren’t they?”

“The times when I was at her mercy?”

“You see, neither human nature nor relationships can stay the same forever. That’s why I don’t think you’re wrong to seek change in your relationship with Shinobu-chan. And I don’t want to think that someone like me could have stopped you. As long as you consider it carefully, that’s enough.”

Careful consideration, huh?

That’s a concept I seem to be sorely lacking.

The pizza dough was virtually made by Kanbaru alone—it’s not that I

couldn't offer a hand because I was so lost in contemplation over the yeast's life or death; I just couldn't even get in her way.

Like spinning a basketball on the tip of her finger, Kanbaru gracefully spread the dough out into a circle. Then, she efficiently placed meat and vegetables, making full use of the table.

Perhaps it was my preconceptions, but her dexterity was less reminiscent of a pizza chef than that of a surgeon attending to the operating table.

Does that make me the nurse?

Not that I could even offer to provide surgery tools—maybe, at least, I could clean up the miss that Kanbaru had made in the kitchen.

"Thanks to you, the breakfast seems to be coming along nicely, but the rain doesn't look like it's going to let up anytime soon, so I'm afraid we're going to have to make some major changes to today's plans."

"Why not proceed in the rain? I don't think Nikko Toshogu Shrine would close its gates just because of rain."

"I think we could still visit Futarasan Shrine, but I'm worried about the Irohazaka slope being a bit dangerous. Navigating the forty-eight hairpin turns in this downpour seems risky, especially downhill."

"Well, even though it's a mountain path, it's also a paved road—we're not exactly driving on the edge of a cliff. If every time it rained, tourist spots became deserted, that would be pretty disheartening, and ironically due to the rain itself. As long as we don't speed, I presume it would be relatively safe—though, I must admit, I don't have a driver's license, so I can't really say for certain."

"Huh? Kanbaru-san, you don't have a driver's license?"

And she's aiming for a doctor's license…? That was something I should have confirmed before embarking on this road trip. But on the other hand, time has changed as well.

I recall her not being able to ride a bicycle, for that matter. Shooting Star Kanbaru Suruga, the superstar who can outrun cars.

"Who is this 'Shooting Star Kanbaru Suruga'? I certainly don't remember receiving such a nickname. But, speaking of shooting stars, Araragi-senpai, unless we climb Irohazaka, we won't be able to reach

Senjougahara.”

“That’s true. But as I feared, the weather prevents us from going stargazing, our main focus.”

It might be that if we haven’t seen Nikko, we haven’t seen anything, but it’s difficult to just “proceed” in this heavy rain. Maybe Hachikuji didn’t have the power to stop the rain after all… To begin with, it’s more likely for a snail to have the ability to make it rain rather than stop it.

“Or could this be the doing of a fox? The fox’s wedding… why is a sunshower called that, I wonder?”

“There’s a theory that it’s because the rain falling on a sunny day makes you feel as if you’re being tricked by a fox.”

“You certainly know a lot. As expected of a future doctor.”

“This kind of thing won’t be on the medical exam.”

“Yeah, it does feel like we’re being made a fool of with this rain.”

Truthfully, the situation was pretty foolish, but to lose the focus of our honeymoon due to a bit of rain would be equally ridiculous.

I feel like I didn’t get to enjoy half of what glamping had to offer because I didn’t get to stay in the fancy tent… Going back home like this seemed almost an insult to Tochigi Prefecture.

“The Nenekirimaru that Shinobu wanted to see was in Futarasan Shrine, which is just past Irohazaka, if I recall correctly. As for our plan to ride swan boats on Chuzenji Lake… No matter how you look at it, that’s impossible for now.”

“Well then, Araragi-senpai, how about we change our plans right away and head for the Nasu Animal Kingdom?”

“I’m not really in the mood to see animals right now.”

That was because, after spending a night near the Killing Stone, I glanced at one of the standing signs amid the torrential rain. It wasn’t the information sign about the Limbo of Infants, but rather it warned, “Beware of bear sightings.”

Could it not have mentioned that earlier?

At my current level of vampirism, I wouldn’t stand a chance against a

bear. Plus, my sister had warned me not to engage in combat with them. To think about it, if I had been attacked by a bear, it could have been culled as well.

But, in a way, that sign made my job as a Hearsay Department employee easier.

The fear of bears surpassed the fear of the Killing Stone. So, as long as that sign was there, the rumors surrounding the cracked stone wouldn't likely spread any further than the sulfur's reach.

Fear is replaced by even greater fear.

This was the fruits of fieldwork, information that could only be gained by physically being on location.

In any case, my top-secret mission from Chief Kouga was eventually accomplished, albeit with some twists and turns similar to a hairpin slope. Knowing that I could give a good report to the person who had sent me abroad made me genuinely happy.

I had to at least get one achievement… Though it was supposed to be just a side-quest, that's how achievements tend to work.

"You're pretty delicate, Araragi-senpai. Did you know the Nasu Animal Kingdom is home to alpacas? They can be found in high-altitude areas, like the Andes in South America."

"Was it alpacas? I thought it was llamas?"

"Well, we could also go and see the geoglyphs."

"This is supposed to be Nasu, not Nazca… I guess it might be nice to visit that Oya History place you mentioned, though I feel like I've seen my fill of stones, this stone oven included. When Hitagi wakes up, we'll talk about it and decide."

"Oh? Are you finally able to make decisions with counsel, Araragi-senpai?"

Whether it was from heart or a mere sarcastic remark, as she put into the handmade stone oven a carefully crafted pizza atop an equally handmade-looking, enormous grilling basket, I couldn't help but think that Kanbaru should not show her unclouded expertise in front of Hitagi.

Seriously, she might make her a maid.

Or her personal pizza chef.

“Still, the most hilarious possible scenario would be if Shinobu was adopted and you became her babysitter.”

“Yeah, I agree. Hilarious, hilarious indeed.”

“Considering the intensive work of a doctor, you might be better off hiring a housekeeper instead. I’m not going to be around forever to clean your room, you know.”

“I want you to keep tidying up for me indefinitely, Araragi-senpai. I’d even like to ask you to help me put on my surgical gown after disinfecting my hands.”

“As flattering as such words may be coming from you, I have no intentions of dedicating my life to cleaning my junior’s room.”

I had no intentions of becoming an OR nurse, either. It was impossible to begin with.

But I got used to the (im)possibilities.

I’d already given my life to a vampire.

I’d nearly forgotten that, to my chagrin… but, it was good that I could clearly recognize it once again on the threshold of my life.

“They say marriage is the graveyard of life, but I think that’s far off. In fact, I feel like a newborn this morning.”

Maybe I was the one who needed a new name, not her.

The pizza, baked in an impromptu stone oven with whatever ingredients we had on hand, was better than every other pizza I had ever tasted in my life—well, I'm not even sure if I can say I've eaten a real pizza (I've had frozen "pizza" at best). Maybe the true essence of a meal starts with the process of cooking itself.

There's truth in the saying that everything tastes better when you make it yourself.

And, when the pizza was done, the sleepy-eyed Hitagi lauded it with a "bravissimo!" So I guess it really was good. Seeing Hitagi so drowsy was a rare occasion.

Even her compliment was intonated like she was talking in her sleep.

I would like to believe that witnessing this rare side of Hitagi will become a part of our everyday lives…

"No, I think our original plan is just fine, don't you? Didn't you say so yourself? Visiting Senjougahara in the rain will make for fond memories. There'll be plenty of times when things won't go as planned in the future, too."

"It's a relief to hear that, as the planner behind this—but what about stargazing, your priority?"

"If not celestial rain, at least terrestrial rain."[25]

Under normal circumstances, that might have been brushed off as just a pun, but hearing it from my bride during our honeymoon felt like an incredibly charming catchphrase.

"And in the worst case, we can always view the starry sky of Senjougahara on a website, can't we?"

"I think that's too dire."

"On our way home, let's stop by a planetarium instead."

"Or better yet, let's revisit this place, say, during our golden wedding

anniversary… By the way, are you okay with driving on the winding Irohazaka slope? Honestly, I'm not too confident."

"Oh my, is it because you've gotten used to driving on the right side of the road in America?"

"It's not that I'm used to the conquest of roadways or anything. It's a mountain road, after all. Irohazaka is one-way, so there's no right or left side… "

"In that case, it's alright if the road isn't all right."

A typical pun.

I guess it's no fright.

"It's just that I'm worried about navigating the winding road in the rain, and Kanbaru doesn't have a license."

"I won't hesitate to drive without a license for your sake!"

"Please don't do anything as reckless as a blackjack on the streets. For our sake too. So, Hitagi, if we have to go through with this in the rain, I have no choice but to entrust the safe driving on Irohazaka road to you."

"Leave it to me. I'll show you that I can pull off a drift even in a minivan."

We would drift off to the afterlife.

What we'll witness is hell itself—I even saw the shores of Sanzu River last night.

"The point is not so much stargazing but seeing Senjougahara itself, isn't? If there's no avalanche or anything of that nature, the marsh in the rain should be romantic as well."

Regardless of whether it's romantic or not, once it was put that way, it made sense. Stargazing was actually added to my original plan—my sole purpose for the honeymoon, one might say, was to take Hitagi, who lost her last name because of me, to Senjougahara.

Right.

Let's proceed with caution, as if tapping on a stone bridge before crossing it.

“And stones again… I’d rather be looking at stars, though.”

“But Araragi-senpai, aren’t stars kind of like stones? I mean, they’re also called meteorites, after all.”

“That’s true, Kanbaru. It’s a shame it’s not meteorites falling from the sky instead of rain, like a meteor shower.”

Ah, you’re all too soft with her, Hitagi-san.

Maybe she’s trying to make up for all these cold days back in high school. Regardless, we both have a lot of making up to do, don’t we? Putting that aside, let’s proceed with our plans as scheduled, without any major changes.

We’ll relax until noon and then set out from the campsite, enjoying a leisurely lunch at some point along the way, before heading to Nikko Toshogu Shrine. Visiting Nikko in the rain does have a certain charm to it.

Besides, while waiting for the pizza to be cooked by Kanbaru, a sudden inspiration struck me—I really wanted to visit Toshogu Shrine.

Afterward, we’ll celebrate our marriage at Futarasan Shrine.

Whether or not we’ll actually climb Irohazaka depends on how the weather progresses, but we’ll give up on the swan boats for sure, and simply settle for a view of Lake Chuzenji. Following that, we’ll see Nenekirimaru at Futarasan Chugu Shrine before heading to Senjougahara.

How about that?

“Are we giving up on visiting Kegon Falls and Ryuzu Falls, too? With the rain, the water volume will have increased, and they’ll be spectacular sights.”

“Why are you trying push yourself closer to danger? That’s out of the question.”

“If only your boathouse was built by Niagara Falls.”

“That would have been impossible.”

As a reckless high school student, I might have gone along with such ideas. But now, prioritizing the safety of my family, I reject the proposal.

Well, in a way, I felt a bit relieved.

Thanks to the stormy weather, I don't have to worry about the usual fretting over what the weather will be like, what I'll do if clouds roll in, or how I'd spend the sunny morning I'd have if it were clear.

That said, I still cling to some hope in the phrase that mountain weather is fickle… Who knows, by the time night falls, maybe the skies over Senjougahara will be unexpectedly clear as far as the eye can see?

"By the way, Koyomi, how did the job go that had you leaving your new bride for the night?"

"Without a hitch," I answer in regards to work. But it might've stirred up some problems on the personal front. "And your midnight deal?"

"I moved billions of yen. Though it was someone else's money."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Don't worry. Tonight, I'll switch off my phone entirely. Come rain or spears or a shower of stars, I'll be here."

During the spring break hell, I believed it was because I fought tooth and nail that I survived. But that doesn't mean the ingredients for our breakfast pizza were eaten because they didn't fight hard.

Shinobu's desired nasuben is, in its full form, an abbreviation of Nasu Makunouchi Bento, which has an even more specific definition. It requires the use of ingredients from Nasu for everything from meat, vegetables, fruit, rice, and milk; even the plate itself must be made from Nasu lumber. Served on nine plates (a nod to the nine-tailed fox) are nine local dishes, with the total price limited to 1500 yen. There are actually a few more details involved, but unfortunately, I am not the guy from "Oishinbo,"[26] advocating for couples to share the same surname. So, let's leave it at that.

That said, let's dig in.

After eating our pizza and taking a brief rest, our newlywed party—myself included, having enjoyed a short nap just in case I needed to take over the wheel—packed up the campsite and headed to the restaurant we had reserved.

Shinobu, who had been lurking in my shadow ever since we got caught in the rain at Killing Stone, eventually sluggishly crept out, looking like someone being roused in the dead of night. Now when her vampirism had intensified after drinking my blood the previous night, this comparison was quite fitting.

Since the battle with the nine-tailed fox didn't happen, her blood-sucking turned out to be completely useless in the end.

Regardless, the fact that she got up without oversleeping was commendable.

Commendable—or indomitable appetite.

She ate Mr. Donuts, as well as nasuben, and probably would've devoured barbeque and pizza if she had been awake for it. It seems, by those measures, that Oshino Shinobu was no more than a healthy young girl, unlike what Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade had been.

As she wobbled by, her golden hair swaying along with her, so much so that it seemed like she was rowing a boat, she devoured her

nasuben by instinct alone, while Hitagi watched with a hint of tenderness in her eyes.

Setting aside to what extent she was genuinely leading a brigade in middle school, from that perspective, her dislike for children—or rather, her uneasiness around them—seems to have been overcome. But then again, I wonder about that.

How heartwarming was this heartwarming scene really?

It felt as though an air of innocence masked the ferocity of the vampire… almost like an endangered species that is protected solely because of its "cuteness."

There's an irritating feeling that while dogs, cats, and maybe bunnies are protected, dire warnings of bees facing extinction fail to hit home… Maybe it would sting more if people were told they wouldn't be able to eat honey anymore.

But would that tender gaze turn to one of terror—nay, disgust—when they learn what creatures used to be that little girl's staple diet?

To chalk it up to prejudice, preconception, or some sort of container would be highly inappropriate—though it hadn't been properly confirmed, it's likely that in one parallel world, Hitagi, and probably Kanbaru, had been killed—possibly even eaten—by a rampaging Shinobu freed from her seal.

Given that this world is connected in some way to the "other," it's probably correct that humans harbor an inherent wariness towards Shinobu.

Now that I think about it, it was rather symbolic when Hachikuji appeared in adult form on my visit to North Shirahebi Shrine—paying my respects before we left to Nikko Toshogu Shrine for our honeymoon.

In that parallel world, we'd encountered a grown-up Hachikuji who hadn't become a god but a warrior, fighting against the vampire who had destroyed the world.

It's not just because ours is a world where only soccer players can hold hands with elementary school children anymore, but perhaps she manifested herself in that form as a reminder to foolish me—though deciphering such an oracle is nigh impossible.

A long way off.

Normally—that is to say, if I had messed up as normal— this meal would have been the perfect opportunity to execute my original plan. It's just as well that things didn't turn out that way, but how much better would it have been if they had?

At any rate, the nasuben was great. It was nice to gather around the barbecue with everyone and get a handmade pizza straight from the oven, but I must flatter the restaurant for their meals—they were a cut above.

Even though we had no cutlery or platter.[27]

Under such impressions, it's no wonder that I make the absurd misconception that bread was made of, well, bread crumbs.

"The menu seems to be very informative in terms of nutrition. I'll consider exploring this for athletes."

The difference between Kanbaru, who viewed even food as an opportunity for learning, and me, was like night and day—nevertheless, this marked the last time on our honeymoon that the four of us dined together.

…Ah, no, it may sound like someone's going to die, but rest assured, that's not where this is headed. I know it's a matter of taste, but it's getting harder and harder each year to see characters from a continuing drama series die by the second or third installment.

I wish for everyone's happiness.

Every single one of us, without exception.

And so it was decided, as we stood in a general store near the restaurant, that we would buy large vinyl umbrellas for everyone for the upcoming Nikko Toshogu Shrine—the heavy rain was just too much for our folding umbrellas to handle.

I did say "for everyone," but actually—

"I'm good without one. I feel sleepier with a full stomach, so I shall rest a little longer."

Shinobu made this remark which may be age-appropriate for both a child and a senior citizen, and then sunk back into my shadow. So in the end, we only needed three—though it's possible that she just didn't want to sit in the child seat.

Kanbaru also insisted that her raincoat was enough, but I wish she'd let me act like a senior once in a while and at least buy her an umbrella. Honestly, seeing Kanbaru in a raincoat was giving me a bit of a trauma, personally speaking.

The memory refuses to be sugarcoated.

Not just that one…

We made a little detour that wasn't part of our original plan by sneaking a visit to the Toshogu Shrine. Although it wasn't meant to be a substitute for our canceled visit to the two main waterfalls, we had to make our way back to the Utsunomiya area from Nasu highlands anyway, so we ventured into the bustling city streets and purchased the highly-recommended Utsunomiya ham cutlets in place of our missing plans.

Since we'd decided to camp in the glass-covered Senjougahara parking lot come rain or sleet, we needed to secure some takeout for dinner—I'd assumed that we'd find something along the way, but the heavy rain had put a damper on our plans, so I turned to my boss' advice for a backup.

Might as well dutifully entrust myself to my boss.

I'd done my duty completely.

But since we'd come this far, it seemed imprudent to pass up on the rumored Utsunomiya gyoza, which we also purchased as a set for our honeymoon dinner.

Though we couldn't enjoy the meal fresh and piping hot as we didn't have a microwave in the car, the anticipation added a touch of excitement.

Ideally, we would enjoy our meal under the starry sky, but we knew better than to get greedy; well, that is, for anything other than our appetite.

Ah, that's a World Heritage site for you.

Weekday or rainy day, the area around Nikko Toshogu Shrine swarmed with tourists, as if they were undeterred by the weather. In fact, with everyone holding up their umbrellas, the crowd looked even more dense than on a sunny day. There were many families with children around, a sight that, at the moment, felt sore to me.

Even after parking the minivan and getting out, Shinobu stayed behind—well, there might not be crucifixes here, but the shrine is still a sacred place. I guess an aberration would struggle to appear. Or maybe she was just sleepy.

"I'd like to see the 'see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil' monkeys, as one who wished to a monkey paw. I heard that not only the famous Three Wise Monkeys but also the entire life cycle of a monkey is on display here, Araragi-senpai. And, Araragi-senpai."

"The life cycle?"

"From a baby monkey born to a mother monkey, growing up healthy and strong despite its rebellious phase, and eventually becoming a mother monkey itself. You could say it's a world view similar to that of Star Wars."

"I haven't seen that yet."

So it's about mothers and children here as well.

The impact of the Jizo stone statues was so powerful that I hadn't mentioned it until now, but near the rest area of the Killing Stone, there were also stone statues called Kyouden Hell.

Not just Jizo. Jigoku Hell.

Though the statues were larger and more imposing than the others that were lined up, their inscription was just Hell.

Kyouden likely wouldn't like to be preached by the likes of an uncultured man like myself, but according to the signboard I managed

to read as I dashed through the rain, he kicked away a meal that his mother had prepared for him and suffered the karmic punishment of falling into a hell of boiling hot water so fierce that it incinerated his legs.

Don't you think the punishment was too harsh?

Also, apparently he had visited the area for its healing waters, but once he arrived, the clear sky clouded over, and thunder shook heaven and earth.

No, I'd like to argue that his punishment might have been too severe, and yes, I too had my fair share of rebelliousness, but I never went so far as to stomp on the food prepared for me.

Being somewhat pampered to begin with, my rebellious phase was rather mild. If I had read that signboard earlier, I wouldn't have spent the night at that rest stop. All things considered, parent-child relationships seems to be a deeply rooted theme since ancient times.

Not limited to mothers but also fathers.

"I wonder if there aren't any crab sculptures?"

"Tochigi and Yamanashi Prefectures don't have a sea, or nasuben would have had crab meat. So, shark dishes, which don't spoil as quickly, had gained popularity at some point, if the newspaper article I read is accurate."

"Hmm. You'd think if there were monkeys, there'd be crabs, too. The battle of Senjougahara could've been a battle between them, for all we know."

As we carried on with such conversations, standing in line in the rain and making sure not to lose sight of each other, we arrived at the main hall of Toshogu Shrine. And there, we found, not the famed Three Wise Monkeys, but the sculpture of the Sleeping Cat by Hidari Jingorou.

…Why, though?

We had intended to pay our respects at the main hall about Tokugawa Ieyasu, but somehow had ended up in a different line. But since we planned to see everything in the end, I guess it didn't matter which order we went in. It was just that it felt as though we had been led here.

“Wow. It’s a much cuter cat than I thought it’d be.”

“I’d say it’s more life-size than I thought it’d be. The sign saying it’s a cat brought to life by the artist really wasn’t lying. It’s so lifelike it seems like it could move any moment. Just seems like it, though.”[28]

Like I had told Oikura, on the reverse side of the sign hung at the gate, there was a painting of a sparrow—a cat with wings, not a tiger.

Beyond this point, and further on, there seems to be a stairway leading to Futarasan Shrine, famous for its deity of marriage—or for its Takamagahara[29] connections. This shrine was also part of the same World Heritage site. However…

“Sorry, Hitagi, Kanbaru. Would you mind going ahead without me for a bit? I want to take a closer look at the cat.”

“Is this part of your job too? With the Hearsay Department?”

“Not exactly…”

I couldn’t constantly bring work on our honeymoon; such a husband might not be much to look forward to.

“…But, it’s important.”

“All right, then. We’ll wait for you at the top. Let’s go, Kanbaru. To Takamagahara, not Valhalla.”

“Right, I shall accompany you. I was born to bask in this glory.”

Without hearing anything further, the two of them pass through the gate, showing how adept they are with me. But I should be aware that it’s my own bad habit that needs to be dealt with somehow.

I should have consulted them beforehand, not at the last minute.

Even if we made it to the Sleeping Cat ahead of schedule, the moment I tried to put my ludicrous idea into words, it became clear how utterly absurd it was.

In no way intending it to be a surprise, it was simply an inclusion—stepping aside so as not to disturb the waiting line at the tourist destination, and then, once again, facing the sleeping cat.

As I did so, I felt like a promising young lover of culture with something to say about traditional Japanese sculpture, but that wasn’t necessarily the case—this was a kind of ritual that Oshino placed great

importance on.

Like a sleeping cat, I gently closed my eyes.

Only a thin veil of eyelids separating truth from illusion.

Then I listened closely, and I began to speak.

Addressing the inner Hanekawa Tsubasa within me.

“The Sleeping Cat at Nikko Toshogu Shrine is said to be the work of the legendary sculptor Hidari Jingorou from the Edo period; however, this is more of a legend than a historical fact, Araragi-kun. There’s no definitive proof, and we don’t even know for sure if Jingorou himself even existed. He’s akin to the ‘what do you do if a bird won’t sing?’ idiom, or the Sanada Brave Ten. Even if we knew they didn’t exist, we can’t deny them anymore since it’s been woven into the fabric of our history—living and dying in people’s hearts. In this sense, the artist seems more supernatural than the carved cat itself. The sleeping cat has a tangible existence while its creator doesn’t seem so real. Does that mean human beings exist, but God doesn’t?”

“Really? You know everything.”

“I don’t know everything, I only know what I know.”

“How come you know things I don’t when you’re supposed to be my inner Hanekawa?”

“Maybe you learned it while studying for exams? Or the information about the World Heritage site in the guidebook unconsciously caught your eye and you just forgot.”

“I see. So that’s how my memory palace works. You pick up the things that I’ve overlooked. That’s how I’ve managed to break through the civil servant exams and the surprise inspections at the FBI Academy.”

“That’s quite a creepy learning method. I wouldn’t recommend that to exam takers.”

“Pretty harsh. The real Hanekawa is much kinder.”

“Isn’t that kind ‘real’ one actually more like a supernatural phenomenon? Even if it were eighteen years ago, a serious glasses-wearing girl with braids is simply a stereotype. It fits perfectly.”

“Come to think of it, I felt like I was playing the role of a ‘friendless, talentless, mediocre dropout’ in high school.”

“From the outside, you looked genuinely scary, like a delinquent. No

exaggeration. Just like you were afraid of everyone, they were afraid of you too. People thought you'd someday cause an incident."

"They were that afraid, huh? That's kind of a shock."

"Maybe that's why Senjougahara-san, having her secret held, went into such excessive self-defense mode—oops, she's not Senjougahara-san anymore, is she?"

"……"

"Sorry I couldn't attend the wedding. I'll just call her Hitagi-chan. I'm one of those 'your name doesn't matter' types, but I do like to respect the person."

"So, it's not about individuality, but the individual?"

"That's right. All I wanted was a family, more than a name, but I'm not sure if my dream has come true or not—that's something only the real me can determine. Not the inner me who lives within you, Araragi-kun."

"The real one's nowhere to be found, and it's not just her name; she's wanted on an international arrest warrant."

"Wow, that's quite the accomplishment, isn't it, me?"

"Honestly, part of the reason I got into the FBI Academy might be due to the connection to the real—once-real you back in our teenage years. The connection's still alive."

"I think that's different. It was because of your skills, Araragi-kun. You chose substance over name. It's not good to attribute everything to me—maybe it's best if we put an end to this kind of talk."

"Because it's weird?"

"It can't be pleasant for Hitagi-chan, right?"

"Even if you try to erase everything, even your name, you can't just erase the impact you've had on me. That spring break—if you hadn't been there…"

"If I hadn't been there, you might not even have met Shinobu-chan in the first place. Oh, strictly speaking, it was Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade back then… Let's just call her Kiss-chan."

"Don't just shorten it."

“Giving something a cute nickname can be a way to dispel any sense of caution or fear towards it. It’s similar to the way that the nine-tailed fox has been turned into a character. On the other hand, there is also the approach of elevating its status by giving something an ominous name, like Killing Stone.”

“Isn’t there that saying that a rose will still bloom beautifully even if it’s not called a rose?”

“True, but it wouldn’t be blooming as a rose then, would it? Just like how we don’t call all plants from the genus Rosa a rose. The name itself may not matter, but how we are addressed by others does matter quite a bit.”

“So is that why you’ve abandoned your name? Because how you’re perceived by others is important to you?”

“That line of thought might lead to a fascinating discussion, but I shouldn’t keep the newlywed Hitagi-san waiting at the marriage shrine. Let’s switch tracks like that trolley problem you mentioned, and I’ll be the one run over. During spring break, if I wasn’t around, you would have never met Kiss-chan—you wouldn’t have offered your blood to a vampire or become one yourself, so you wouldn’t have needed saving by me either.”

“Then she wouldn’t have eaten anyone either.”

“That’s true, at least not in front of you.”

“……”

“Well, I think it’s good to occasionally ponder over that issue, like an exercise of sorts. Even though we all—myself included—faced a shared tragedy, we eventually found happiness. So, it would be a shame to diminish the significance of that struggle. However, to play the revolutionary, we’re living in the future created by that very battle, asking ourselves ‘what was that fight all for?’”

“I’m not talking to you as the revolutionary, but as the class president. Always.”

“Ah, yes, you’re still living your high school days, forever.”

“I’m twenty-four. Always a repeater.”

“Always in the middle of youth, then. Certainly, the idea of adopting Shinobu-chan, not Kiss-chan, as a daughter is not only far-fetched but

revolting, and something that only an immature teenager could get away with."

"But isn't it still better than being a slave?"

"I wonder. It depends on what Shinobu-chan wants. As a princess, a king, and even a god at one point, if Shinobu-chan wishes to be a slave now, I would think that we should respect her wish. Didn't Gaen-san feel the same way?"

"Perhaps it's my ego. Wanting to make her my daughter when she wants to stay a slave is just like keeping her alive despite her death wish."

"If you're trying to change the setting for future compliance by making her a daughter instead of a slave, that makes sense. So if we adopt that logic, it would be impossible to forgive her for her lengthy period of eating people."

"……"

"But if you just want to make her your daughter because Shinobu-chan is cute, adorable, and lovable, then that's not ego. It's love."

"Love?"

"That's your style of confession in English."

"Well, I'd say that's more Hitagi's style… But in katakana, it's got a different flavor."

"Would you prefer I pronounce it as 'lav'?"

"Flavorful…"

"Isn't it clear that the ideal Hanekawa Tsubasa you envision would nonchalantly declare such embarrassing hypocrisy straight out in the open, without a trace of shame?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. It feels like the Hanekawa in my memory is somewhat unclear."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing? If your plan to adopt a vampiress was disrupted systematically because you remembered that in the past, she had committed sins, that's some kind of cancel culture, isn't it? It's not because you've grown up, but rather, a decision that properly aligns with the times. This judgment sounds even more immaculate than spring break Araragi, doesn't it?"

“…You’re saying I’m more fastidious now than my high school mentality?”

“I can’t be sure, but I’ve happily thrown myself into the revolution because I wanted to be a dirtied white cat. However, as your inner Hanekawa, I can’t even begin to imagine the thoughts and feelings of ‘Her.’ I don’t know everything, I only know what I know—and that’s what I don’t know.”

“……”

“But, Araragi-kun, I think you know. You’ve been closely attached to Shinobu-chan for years, even more so than her name, constantly observing her as if under some form of probation. If you believe it’s safe for her to be your daughter, then that judgment is probably correct, even if that’s not necessarily the ‘righteousness’ you want.”

“…That’s only right for me, isn’t it? But I’m aware that just because my inner Hanekawa is telling me what’s convenient for me doesn’t mean that it’s true—rather, as my inner Hanekawa, I was hoping you’d offer a more critical perspective. Being assured that I’m right only makes things harder, to the extent that I almost wish I could summon my inner Oikura to refute it all outright. I mean, my body isn’t just my own anymore.”

“Mm, mhm.”

“I have a family now, and a responsibility to my family.”

“Are you talking legally? You know there’s no righteousness in the law, it exists only to be enforced. In the grand scheme of things, it all started when Hitagi-chan chose to abandon her family name and adopt yours, like the beginning of a home drama.”

“A home drama, huh?”

“Maybe a legal drama. About law. Yes, it’s fascinating. But Araragi-kun, could it be the other way around?”

“Eh?”

“I mean, you may feel a sense of guilt now, as if torn between a lifelong partner with whom you wish to share your future and committing to the dark legacy of a legendary vampire.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a dark legacy, or even if I don’t feel that way, it’s kind of like I’m starting to. I think that turning sin into

common property is somewhat, well, imposing.”

“But isn’t that the opposite?”

“Opposite? What’s opposite?”

“I don’t know everything, and I’ve never been a god, so I struggle when asked about anything and everything, but as for this, it was a resounding success that you asked me, not Oikura-san. It may even be something that only I—now non-existent, “Hanekawa Tsubasa”—can say. A sentiment that only I know.”

“Sentiment?”

“It’s not a law, not a rule, not anything that requires memorization. So, isn’t hesitating to involve the element of Shinobu-chan—an aberration and a child—in your and Hitagi-chan’s relationship, which you have sworn to the gods, not wrong? After all, chronologically speaking, the relationship between you and Shinobu-chan came first.”

“Ah.”

“Don’t just go ‘ah.’ It was Hitagi-chan who intervened in that master-servant relationship later on. Yes, just as smoothly as she slipped in between you and me back in our third year of high school.”

”……“

“I like Hitagi-chan and we remained friends ever since, but I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me—it bothered me so much that I became a monster.”

“……”

“Originally, shouldn’t you have tried to persuade Shinobu-chan instead of Hitagi-chan? Even before deciding whether or not to adopt her, you should have consulted with her first, even when proposing. You must have known that you had to gain Shinobu-chan’s permission before even asking Hitagi-chan’s father. It’s just like how you can’t neglect the cat you have when welcoming a new one. After all, it’s incredibly late to realize that your body isn’t just yours alone anymore. You’ve had a blonde little girl with you all along.”

“……”

“As the inner Hanekawa Tsubasa that you envision as ideal, I can say as many shameful and hypocritical things as I want without batting an

eye. However, Hitagi-chan must never be made to feel that way again. You cannot allow guilt from sneaking in, whisking you away like a thief in the night, to dictate your new married life. It would be preposterous. You mustn't let Hitagi-chan feel for a single moment that she stole you away from Shinobu-chan—right?"

"…As always, you really do know everything."

"But of course—I don't know everything."

I simply learned what it feels like to be the one left behind.

From someone, who shall remain nameless.

Though I was prepared for it, the words spoken were harsher than I had anticipated, and there was no doubt it had added fuel to the confusion, if not made the situation worse.

Possibly because I was deep in thought in front of the Sleeping Cat, I found myself more deeply engrossed than usual. From a distance, one might think I was genuinely moved by Hidari Jingorou's sculpture, but from the perspective of someone who had read the guidebook, I could just as easily be the object of ridicule, not even knowing whether the sculpture was crafted by Hidari Jingorou, let alone if he really existed. It made me feel embarrassment deep within.

The truth is, whoever created it, whatever master sculptor with the seeming ability to bring the work to life—whether or not they actually existed—is somewhat beside the point. What's important is that, in the context of a work attracting literally droves of people like a bustling marketplace, one should understand that it's imbued with commensurate emotions.

Though I'd like to say the same of the Killing Stone as well, its lack of touristy development only adds to its eerie charm—it was anything but ordinary.

In any case, my impulsive musings on this allowed me, for once, to think deeply and grow from the experience; enlightened and made aware of a new perspective. Real or not, I owe my gratitude to Hidari Jingorou.

For sure.

Though I'm older now and not so quick to wholly agree and comply with everything the braided, glasses-wearing class president advises, I must also weigh the ethics of giving up on adopting a little girl vampire.

I'm not as quick as a fox in choosing ethical considerations over modern society.

Instead of giving up, let's rethink the approach.

Once more, from the beginning.

How about we make up for what we couldn't do during spring break—instead of thinking about ways for everyone to be unhappy, let's consider how we could bring happiness to all.

Otherwise, there's no point in growing older.

I managed to turn twenty-four, looping my third year of high school, graduating, entering college, getting a job, moving to the US, and getting married. All of this was done so that I could accomplish things that were impossible when I was seventeen or eighteen.

It's about seizing the moment and doing what can only be done now.

There are dates that only an updated version of myself can be up to.

"So, Shinobu, I'm sorry, but I'll need you to bear with me a little longer. We need to come face-to-face. I'm not finished talking with you yet."

Not fully sharing my perceptions with Shinobu, we had already started on the roadmap for our honeymoon and our family life. That was, to begin with, the root of the problem. We became so inseparable before we even united our names that, in a way, I had treated her carelessly… If I wanted to adopt my slave as my daughter, I should have loved her like one first.

Just as every donut hole is part of the donut, so too is a large wound.

At some point, it had become a part of me.

No matter how fresh or painful the wound, it eventually becomes an old scar, and there's no point in regretting it.

"Or maybe treating you as family was already too casual, but if we keep considering and exploring our options, there might just be a way for you to become Araragi Shinobu while keeping your wish intact. If you want, we could even ask the marriage deity over there…"

Hmm… No response.

She should hear me calling out to her, even while asleep.

I was trying to say good things, but in the end, were they only ever the same off-target remarks I always seem to make?

Was I exasperating her?

“Shinobu… hey, Shinobu?”

I felt ignored—or more precisely, as if Shinobu’s presence in my shadow had become completely invisible. Amid the pouring rain, I crouched down and touched the ground, bewildered.

“…….”

I couldn’t sense her.

I could still feel the authority of Tokugawa Ieyasu… that he gave the command to build Nikko Toshogu Shrine is a historical fact, I think. In an uncertain world where I don’t know what to believe, still, one thing is certain: since who knows when, the blonde vampire who was supposed to reside in my shadow has been conspicuously absent. I couldn’t wait for her to reply anymore.

Could it be that while I was concentrating on my inner conversation with Hanekawa—while my eyes were closed at the sleeping cat—she had snuck away under my nose? It would have been an easy escape.

But where to? And why?

“No way—”

I had no clue where she might be. As I stood up and looked around, if she were to blend into the crowd with her small physique, there’s no way I’d be able to find her. But, as for why she would do it, I can think of one possibility.

This had happened once before.

In my third year of high school, on the day before the culture festival.

“*—Maybe Shinobu-chan went on a journey to find herself?”*

Not again.

“I understand every detail, Araragi-senpai. You don’t need to say anything else, and you don’t need to worry about anything. All your worries rest on my shoulders now. I swear on the name of Tokugawa Ieyasu that I will find Shinobu-chan. So please, Araragi-senpai, continue on your way to Senjougahara with Araragi-senpai.”

“But, Kanbaru…”

“In all honesty, I implore you not to abandon your honeymoon here. Of course, if there was an imminent danger to Shinobu-chan’s life, there would be no room for choice—but that is not the case. If you still insist on leaving your bride to search for Shinobu-chan, then you may as well shoot me dead.”

I didn’t have a gun on me.

Nor should an ordinary guy like me even possess such a thing.

“We aren’t some high school kids skipping school to search for her anymore. It’s time to grow up.”

You’re one to talk.

Still a student yourself.

But she was right. Much has changed since the time when I ran around town trying to find Shinobu as she was on her journey of self-discovery. Now, I find myself lost in an unfamiliar land without even a sense of direction.

Wandering aimlessly could make me the one who’s lost.

And the god of lost children was far, far away.

“Besides, if I am granted Araragi-senpai’s permission to move on my own, I have a method that could drastically improve the chances of finding her compared to if you were to search for her yourself. Please understand that I don’t say this out of any desire to prioritize Araragi-senpai. I know how important Shinobu is to you, Araragi-senpai. That’s why, in this instance, you should leave it all to me.”

I couldn't keep track of whether she meant Hitagi or me, but… it seems she had a way?

I thought it made sense that I should be the one most attuned to finding Shinobu, given our spiritual bond and master-servant relationship. But I couldn't find her on my own back in high school. To my frustration, I had to wait for her to come out of hiding on her own accord.

In the first place, it was rather irregular for Shinobu to break free from my shadow… Maybe it hadn't been wise to let her drink a considerable amount of blood before inspecting the stone.

That might have temporarily allowed her independent action.

Metaphors about parent and child didn't seem appropriate anymore… But maybe like a Bluetooth smartwatch?

Even so, it was still daytime… Ahh, I see.

The heavy rain helped too. Even in a place named after sunlight such as Nikko[30], there wasn't a single ray of sunlight right now—that could be considered dangerous, though.

What if the fickle mountain weather changed again…? Neither of us knew the area well. Actually, Shinobu was worse off. At least I had a smartphone with a map app, but unlike Kagenui-san, who treated her Shikigami like a little sister, I hadn't even given Shinobu a kid's cell phone.

Because she wasn't my daughter.

No, it's no use; I just can't sit still any longer.

"I guarantee it. Also, if you move, it's highly probable that our strategy will fail. The best thing for Shinobu-chan is for you to go with Araragi-senpai to Senjougahara."

"I trust you wholeheartedly. If you say it is necessary for me to wear a Naoetsu High School girl's uniform to find Shinobu, even at my ripe age of twenty-four, I will gladly do it. However, if you say not to do anything, I'd at least like to know what you're planning."

"I'm gonna do something that you'd stop me from doing if I told you. That's all I can say."

It was tempting to point out which of us it was that hadn't changed

since school, but I suppose we were both alike in our stubbornness. The wolf may lose his teeth but never his nature—including the fact that when I look straight into the eyes of my devoted junior, I can't help but concede.

And that was certainly a hint.

She'd revealed as much of her strategy as possible, just barely toeing the line.

Even I, who wouldn't hesitate to employ any means necessary to find Shinobu, would be compelled to stop what she had in mind.

"……"

Ah, so that's it—she would ask that conman for a hand. Not the monkey's paw, at least.

I had come to know of it only after becoming a cop to apprehend him, but through her mother or her aunt, Kanbaru had a direct connection to Kaiki Deishuu, the infamous conman who wreaked havoc in our hometown. It seems that even during high school, unbeknownst to me, she had met with that man.

He had suddenly vanished from the public eye at some point (which might be a natural consequence for a criminal), so I had assumed her ties with him had been severed as well. Even the free-spirited Gaen-san seemed to have decided against approaching the Kanbaru family—but it was quite surprising that she still kept in contact with him.

Right, he might be very skilled at tracking down a runaway girl. In this particular field, his expertise, annoyingly, may well surpass that of Gaen-san.

Even though I am well aware that the world doesn't always run on justice and righteousness, and even if I tried to put aside personal feelings, as a police officer, it irks me to rely on a criminal's help in a tough situation. But, as Kanbaru said, the chances of finding her were the highest this way.

In fact, there was no one else to lend a hand. Not even a foot.

Even if I disregard our history, as an agent of law enforcement, my presence would undoubtedly put that conman on high alert. And as for assurances, the notorious criminal would never deceive Kanbaru—no matter how reckless an illicit investigation may be, her safety was guaranteed.

Certainly, a decision had to be made.

A painful one.

“Got it. I’ll leave everything to you. I grant you carte blanche. But I’ll bear all responsibility. Even if things don’t go well, you don’t need to worry. So, without feeling any pressure, please do your best.”

“Leave it to me! Now hurry up and go, Araragi-senpai. There’s a minivan waiting for you in the parking lot. From here on out, it’s just the two of you. Just a return to the way it should be, the real honeymoon.”

It was really paradoxical to think that not pursuing the runaway Shinobu would be best for her. As baffling as it may be, when urged like that, I knew that my mission was clear—to make my way to Oku-Nikko as soon as possible.

Without waiting for me to leave fully, Kanbaru took out her smartphone and began pushing a number on the touch panel that she seemed to remember by heart. Had I gone back on my word and arrasted that conman who played a big part in my motivation to become a police officer, it would not have been impossible. But such betrayal was out of the question.

Actually, I was glad I didn’t.

Kanbaru probably thought I’d moved far away when she began the call, but just like how Shinobu regained the power to temporarily break away from her shadow seal, my five senses, too, were enhanced —sharper than they had any right to be. Just as I was tiptoeing through the dark, I could barely make out the familiar voice of my junior from over a dozen meters away.

“My name is Kanbaru Suruga. My special skill is the double jump.”

Are you still saying that?

Maybe she had matured since she refrained from saying anything about Araragi-senpai—but she was no criminal, and I had no intention to eavesdrop. On the contrary, I wanted to quicken my pace so as not to overhear, but I couldn’t go faster than the speed of sound—in between the rain’s cacophony, I could just make out Kanbaru’s next line.

“Sorry to bother you while you’re so busy, Sengoku-chan, but I need a bit of your help—it’s not about a doujinshi, no. Not as a manga artist,

but as a specialist——”

“What a pity. To think Kanbaru would get an urgent call from her training site when she’s not even a full-fledged doctor yet. It must have been an emergency.”

This was meant to be the real honeymoon.

Kanbaru had mentioned as much, and while it was true, the inside of the minivan we found ourselves in alone felt strangely spacious—and the child seat in the rear looked so very empty.

We were like an ordinary couple with a child.

The question of what happened to the baby would undoubtedly arise. Though it was a common scenario, would we arouse suspicion and be questioned by the police?

If we were, I’d have to show my police ID, but I’d rather not get into any more trouble than necessary.

“Ah, I guess that’s how it is. Kanbaru had her reasons.”

The reasons were really mine, but Kanbaru had forbidden me from speaking of it. Her point was to not make Hitagi worry. It was a valid argument, but who knew keeping secrets from your partner could be this difficult?

I had explained her nocturnal nature, so Hitagi wouldn’t ask about Shinobu again. But, when night fell, I’d have to explain why she wasn’t coming out… What was I supposed to say?

“Ready or not, time to conquer Irohazaka.”

“Could you say ‘climb’ instead of ‘conquer’? The rain is only getting stronger… Seriously though, should we leave the radio on for landslide disaster information?”

“Just checked a while ago, so no worries. We’re all clear. So we’re skipping the swan boats on Lake Chuzenji and heading straight to the Futarasan Shrine, right?”

“Ah, no, actually, we can skip that too. Toshogu Shrine was really crowded, and we’re really pressed for time.”

“Really? Didn’t Shinobu want to see the legendary sword Nenekirimaru?”

“Yeah, she did, but she said when you actually get up close, it’s not all that impressive—she’s got her own giant sword, after all.”

“Really? Interesting.”

“She’s the type to lose interest right before she starts, even though she’s the one who brought it up.”

“Sounds like a troublesome type.”

It was a nerve-wrecking conversation—even though we hadn’t yet tackled the mountain pass—considering that in the past, being caught in a clumsy lie would’ve led to being stabbed in the eye by a sharpened pencil.

You may have forgotten, but such things did happen.

“So, we’ll head straight to Senjougahara from here then?”

“Yeah. Let’s stick to that plan.”

“I did say ‘straight’, but it’s going to be pretty winding.”

Back when “Senjougahara Hitagi” was an all-around tense and prickly girl, she would’ve easily seen through my deception. But, the twenty-four-year-old Araragi Hitagi seemed content with the situation and continued on her way to Irohazaka.

And that’s a good thing.

Not just because it works out for me, but also because I wouldn’t want her to revert to the way she was, constantly on edge.

But what would Hitagi do if she knew about Shinobu’s disappearance? As I recall, when Shinobu went missing the day before the cultural festival, I used every contact I had (all three of them) to launch a search for her, and Hitagi was the only one who didn’t participate.

She had refused me.

I remember being surprised about that.

While there were enough circumstances that led to her refusal, I wonder if Hitagi now would have abandoned our honeymoon to search for Shinobu with me?

I honestly don't know if that would be desirable. Some may argue that a married couple should share both happiness and adversity, but maybe not a bad ending to a spring break.

Since we had a traditional Japanese wedding, we didn't make that particular vow, but there is something to the idea of standing together in sickness and in health.

Even if Shinobu wasn't an aberration, and even if she didn't feed on humans, I'm still not sure if it would be the right thing to do—to raise a daughter who periodically runs away from home, and propose such a thing to the person I love most… But that's what adopting a child entails, isn't it?

On the other hand, Shinobu is no longer who she was back then. She's not at a crossroads between vampire and human, unable to decide which path to take—Her journey of self-discovery had begun before she was sealed.

And now, she seems to have settled into the coffin that is my shadow.

This time, it's different from the last time she ran away—it's not just "again." My opinion may differ from Hanekawa's, but she didn't leave because she wanted attention like an old, household cat.

Well, that was my inner Hanekawa's voice, so more like my own voice —anyway, if she had left in secret due to her own free will, I can assert that she didn't do it to trouble me.

On the contrary, it was for my sake.

There's chance that she had discretely left in order to let us experience the "real honeymoon"—although it would be difficult to read the scenario far enough to predict that Kanbaru would go out searching for her alone. There was a past between the two that led them to the brink of killing each other, so it's not impossible to say that they understand each other in the way delinquents might, after a heated fight.

So, what about the possibility that the two conspired to pull a surprise on us? I doubt it. Neither of them is the type to pull off such things, in both a good and bad sense… really, in both an excellent and a terrible sense.

But, it is also true that the two are capable of communicating without words. It might be nothing more than a wishful hope, but if it turns out to be true, I have to be angry that it was unnecessary meddling.

A honeymoon for just the two of us.

A night spent with Hitagi on Senjougahara.

On such an important night of our lives, I would have definitely wanted her to be by my side—I'm sure Hitagi must have had similar feelings for Kanbaru, too.

Regardless of her name.

Regardless of her species, or her staple food.

We call that family.

"Now, we're entering. Hehe, look at the GPS. It says it's the way to go, but the road is twisting and turning like a snake. It's almost coiled up. How odd."

"It sounds like this is the most exciting part for you and not Senjougahara. Huh? Wait, for real… Is this a glitch? Can a minivan really climb up a hill like this?"

"Leave it to me, the conqueror of Irohazaka."

"Please quit it."

At Futarasan Chugushi Shrine, it seemed impossible to make a visit either way. The treasure house which displayed the sword Nenekirimaru was unexpectedly closed for the day. When something doesn't go well, it often feels like nothing goes right at all.

In the end, it never stopped raining.

In fact, when we finally arrived at Senjougahara, the sky appeared livid—the whole landscape seemed less like a marsh and more like a swamp.

The gloom intensified in the absence of sunlight, and with even fewer streetlights than the Killing Stone site, it made me imagine the breathtaking night sky we would have seen if only the weather had been clear.

"It's not so bad, really—it's like the Acqua Alta. I'm deeply satisfied just to have set foot on these historic grounds. I have no complaints."

"I appreciate your optimism…"

I think the reason you're satisfied is not because you set foot here, but because you stepped on the pedal at Irohazaka… This place was certainly as disastrous as the Acqua Alta we had heard so much about.

Wouldn't spending a night here be close to suicidal? There were no tourists or locals around—so desolate that it makes me question if the famous Nikko Toshogu shrine was a mirage. In this bleakness, I doubted we'd even run into a bear.

For safety, maybe we should have turned back and headed to a more populated spot. But, the thought of navigating those steep, hairpin turns in the rain was far from appealing.

Distracted by the rain, I was also unable to uncover why the turns were forty-eight and why the slope was called Iroha.

"How about we take a short and safe stroll, and then enjoy the sound of the rain from the car, while eating some Utsunomiya ham cutlets and dumplings as we reminisce about the old days? Remember when I

caught your cheek with a stapler?"

"I'm not so bothered by it anymore, but if you're going to bring up old wounds, I might have to think of a fitting response."

"I wish Oikura-san could've seen this view, too."

"Why?"

"Maybe I should mail it to her."

When the photo of the rain-soaked Senjougahara reaches her, I know the expected reply "It serves you right!" would be sent my way. It's no exaggeration to say that she lives and breathes solely for the purpose of saying that phrase to me. She's never sent me an email with any other text.

What kind of life is that?

With such a competition, I can't afford to be careless with my own life either.

But even if it weren't for the rain, the scene would still have been incredibly bleak—or maybe primordial would be more fitting—to the point that it really looked like the aftermath of a battle between gods. Though there was no sense of unidentifiable dread like the Killing Stone.

The battle was long over.

There were no giant centipedes or giant serpents.

And, of course, no foxes.

It was rather like a place where you felt at ease, as if it was safer because it had already been bombarded. But it was no less bleak.

The fact that it was a marshland made it feel even bleaker than the Killing Stone.

It might have looked different in another season, but I can't help but wish there was a single flower blooming somewhere. Then again, even if one did blossom, it would only be scattered by the rain.

Having arrived at Senjougahara, our initial goal was achieved, barely saving the day, but it was hard to say that anything akin to a honeymoon truly transpired. The objective was the only thing accomplished.

But I guess that's how it goes.

Unbeaten by the rain. Unbeaten by the wind. Life is a series of small moments of happiness.

There's no such thing as a perfect life.

Just like there were no stars in the sky.

"Hey, Koyomi."

As I wandered through the darkened place in the pouring rain, feeling something akin to an adult's resignation, Hitagi cut in, out of the blue.

"Just as our journey is nearing its end, I have a wonderful proposition for you."

"Uh…?"

"Do I detect a hint of reluctance in your expression?"

"No, it's just that… well, I think your suggestions have rarely been any good."

To be entirely frank, ever since she was Senjougahars, Hitagi had always been like that. She loved surprises, but she was terrible at pulling them off—or so I remarked, even though she probably wouldn't want to hear it from me. She once secretly invited her father along on a date, and covertly obtained a driver's license while still in high school.

More dangerous than surprising.

She offered risks, not thrills.

"Don't worry. I've matured too. Well, it might be better to call it a consultation rather than a proposal. I plan to take your opinion into account and use it as reference too."

"So my opinion is just for reference?"

"I'd like to discuss our post-honeymoon life while we still have time. We're both quite the workaholics and seldom have the chance to chat like this. We've definitely had our misunderstandings because of it, so I want to make sure that doesn't happen again."

Somehow, saying something so incredibly honest seemed frightening as a ruse. What could it be? Was she asking for a discussion about the

division of household chores after marriage that Kanbaru was also concerned about? Or was it about deciding whether to live in a boathouse or a trailer home while there's still time?

"Divorce procedures seem so troublesome just to think about. Changing my name back for the second time would be far too much of a hassle."

"Please don't say that you don't want to divorce just because the procedure is complicated, especially when we're newlyweds."

Sure, there might be some significance in having the same surname for a married couple, but that would be in an unpleasant sense. It was like making a contract difficult to terminate by writing a massive number of fine clauses.

"I'm offering to discuss the issues now so that they don't cause arguments later on. Do you understand?"

"I don't object, but it feels like a rather pessimistic conversation… It's probably better than turning a blind eye to the inconvenience, but give me a proposal that we can get along with, if anything."

"That depends on you, Koyomi. If you agree to my consultation, we can continue to be a lovey-dovey couple."

"Pressure."

Oh well, it's fine.

Sadly, there was no chance of any interference, and yes, such opportunities were rare. To have an open and honest conversation with Hitagi, just the two of us facing each other for a whole night□- there would be no one to stop us if we did start arguing, but we would cross that bridge when we came to it.

"Well, actually, it's about Shinobu-san□ I mean, Shinobu."

"It still feels weird when you call her without honorifics. What about Shinobu?"

"I've been thinking that maybe we should adopt her, what do you think?"

“Um…”

I couldn’t help but glance at my shadow, despite knowing that in this rainy night, there was none to be found—and even if there were, Shinobu wasn’t there.

“What did you just say?”

“I said I want to display her on our mantelpiece, but surely you don’t mind, do you?”

“That’s like a line from the villain in the movie RRR.”

The meaning was generally the same, but I would’ve phrased it more delicately—like the surprise I had planned to launch here in Senjougahara.

Adoption?

“Arranging a familial registry for an aberration child might not be a walk in the park, but I reckon if we ask Oikura-san, she’d be up for forging some documents.”

We rely on Oikura far too much.

Why do we try so hard to snatch her hard-fought work-life balance right out of her hands, after all she’s survived?

No, that’s not the point here.

“Um, Hitagi-san…”

“I know what you’re thinking, Koyomi. I can see right through you, after all. Look, I get that you want a blonde little girl all to yourself, but I don’t want my husband to own a loli-slave.”

“I’ve really been trying to avoid the phrase ‘loli-slave’ up until now.”

“It’s not like I just blurted it out on a whim, you know. I’ve been thinking about it for some time now, even before the wedding. The relationship between you two is very important. I wanted to respect the bond between you and Shinobu, so I refrained from interfering and tried to stay out of it as much as possible. But I can’t do that from now on, can I?”

“Well… I’ve actually been thinking the exact same thing, but…”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to put on a front, I’m sure you will still

continue to flirt with Shinobu behind my back. In the shadows, literally."

Her trust in her husband is zero.

Not surprising, considering my barbaric behavior in high school.

"But you know, the world is no longer willing to accept that. Understand?"

"Painfully so. In my heart."

"So, as your life planner, allow me to make a suggestion. In order to bring the situation of a blonde little girl living in the shadows and our family to an acceptable societal level, after a trial period, I propose that we raise Shinobu as the eldest daughter of the Araragi family. That is the best current option."

"A trial period?"

It sounds like we're talking about a rescue cat.

But, I understood what she was trying to say—rather, it's spot on. It's almost perfectly in line with what I've been thinking myself.

The only difference between our ideas is the notion of resealing Shinobu using my name. But then again, if I were to argue further, suggesting to take Shinobu in without that core idea in the first place… well, it's somewhat deranged.

Just yesterday, I was convinced it was a great idea. But now, hearing it from someone else, the idea of adopting her seems so odd.

"Hitagi…"

"Yes?"

"Honestly, it's a pleasant surprise. I never expected you to say such a thing—in a good way. Just knowing that you've been thinking about Shinobu, it makes me want to cry with joy."

"Cry. As much as you'd like."

"Your hawkishness scares me."

If we're talking misunderstandings, we've been through one that created a gap between Japan and America. But as a year has passed since then, our feelings have become aligned—how could we not be

happy?

But.

“Family is not to be taken lightly. Even if she looks like an eight-year-old, adopting a vampire as a daughter—”

“You mean shortcutting through the pain of childbirth and the nightmarish child-rearing until the age of three, and having a cute child to cherish, right?”

“People who think like that must never become foster parents. You would be as terrible as me at it. You can’t just pick the good parts in child-rearing.”

“By the time I met you, Shinobu was already a part of your life, wasn’t she? No, more than that, she was your other half.”

“……”

“I thought that marrying you meant marrying Shinobu as well, but was I mistaken?”

No, you weren’t mistaken. That’s right.

But I can’t bring myself to impose that truth on her—even though it seemed she’d already figured out my inner Hanekawa’s point. Or perhaps even she had come to this conclusion through her conversations with her own Inner Hanekawa.

That being said, there’s nothing left to do but to say it.

Despite our promise not to keep any secrets about aberrations, I wanted to take this one to the grave. But, since I’d allowed Hitagi to go that far, I had no choice but to confess now—even if it sparks a discussion about divorce.

“Hitagi. Shinobu is a vampire.”

“Yes, she’s an ex-vampire, right? Even six years ago, I couldn’t have overlooked having a loli-slave.”

“Now, I would definitely agree that it’s something that can’t be overlooked—but vampires are a completely different species from humans.”

In fact, there are even doubts as to whether they are truly alive. The nature of their existence is so uncertain, so fundamentally different,

that they can only be described as aberrations.

Urban legends. Street gossip. Rumors in the wind.

“I get it. What you’re talking about is her being nocturnal, right? I myself am more inclined to be active during the night, too.”

“That understanding’s a little flat.”

It seemed I wouldn’t be allowed to just leave it there; I’d have to lay it out plainly for her.

“Vampires eat people, Hitagi.”

“……”

“And Shinobu has eaten people before—right in front of me during her vampire days. She doesn’t eat people anymore, though. Ever since I started protecting her, she’s only ever fed on my blood. All the nutrients she needs come through me, so in a way, she’s already like my daughter by blood.”

There was no reaction from Hitagi.

The fact that this acute trader didn’t respond with an immediate reaction was an indication of the shock she felt—so I continued.

“She doesn’t eat people anymore, and I won’t let her. But we can’t erase her past. In six hundred years, she must have eaten at least a thousand, and not just vampire hunters and specialists alone.”

The real number was likely much higher—Shinobu herself had said as much.

She possessed a potential danger to the entire human race, and a mere ten years’ confinement in my shadow was far from enough to atone for her sins. Plus, her prison was more like a birdcage with an open door.

“To adopt Shinobu is to take such a monster into the family. It comes with responsibility, and socially speaking, it’s just as bad as having a loli-slave.”

“I think that’s where opinions may differ between men and women.”

I decided to make a mental note never to use the phrase “loli-slave” again; it wasn’t appropriate for serious conversations like this one—which was then interrupted. “Listen, Koyomi.”

“Even if this revelation were to destroy our relationship, I would be utterly shattered to think that you believed I’d be frightened by such a small secret. To think that I accepted your proposal with such half-hearted resolve would be an insult beyond belief.”

Ah…

She really was angry. Pretty unusual, there had rarely been an instance in which she was this furious before.

“Well, I appreciate the fact that you accepted me, with all my quirks. Even without considering Shinobu’s role in this, I know I’m already a bit weird. But you see, this…”

“My own mother handed her real daughter over to a perverted man.”

Hitagi interrupted bluntly.

She had wanted to forget that memory so badly that she prayed to the crab.

“She’s an undeniable criminal, even more vile than a carnivorous beast. But even after knowing that, you never created any distance between us or treated me like a broken piece of glass. You confessed your love to me while aware of my mother’s situation. And even though we’re estranged, she’s still my mother. You even proposed marriage to me, knowing full well she’d become your mother-in-law. And that’s after you became a police officer.”

“……”

“So, do you think I wouldn’t forgive you for accepting Shinobu? I’m so mad at you, I could just kill you.”

Her words were tumbling out chaotically and gibbering; she was more enraged than ever before.

Even when we had discussed breaking up in the past, she had pushed me to my limits in an orderly fashion—now, with her vinyl umbrella down, I couldn’t tell whether she was damp from the rain or the tears streaming down her face.

And I was entirely at fault.

When I first suggested adopting Shinobu, I hadn’t taken Hitagi’s feelings into account at all. And even though many, er, just a handful of friends had pointed this out to me and prompted me to consider her

feelings, I had only envisioned the typical, conventional reactions.

In considering various possibilities, such as having to make a difficult decision if I made such a proposal or the chance that Hitagi might accept it, I only imagined passive reactions. But never had I considered such a proactive stance, such a twist like those of Irohazaka.

For her to suggest that we go all the way together, she and Araragi Koyomi…

There's no way it could be so straightforward.

"Anyway," my dear began to say.

"Let's let Shinobu suck my blood too—just at the brink."

"Huh? How did you come to that conclusion?"

"I didn't realize that your periodic blood-letting to Shinobu held much significance, but it weighs heavily on my heart. If we're talking about providing nutrition, we can't call ourselves foster parents unless we both let her drink our blood."

"Ah… well, yeah, but…"

What an idea.

It seems like our thoughts are starting to veer off course—I might have misspoken when I said she was already like a daughter to me. Was the reason I couldn't make a snap decision earlier not because the thought of Shinobu's food shocked me, but because I was contemplating such things?

"Hitagi, hear me out. Vampirism might sound convenient, and I won't deny that it has its advantages. But, it has pretty big risks as well."

"I'll carry those risks, like a newborn baby."

"…If Shinobu ever has a brother or sister, they would end up having to bear the same burden—we would force such a bizarre life on them, where not only their sister, but also their parents are like vampires."

"Our child would be frightened by such a thing? If that's what you call misfortune, then we'll just make up for it by making them extra happy."

As happy as we are.

Hitagi declared this resolutely, putting the matter to rest.

"…Kaka."

Unintentionally, I let out a vampiric chuckle—I had made my fair share of mistakes during these past few days, let alone the entirety of my existence. Surely, helping the limbless King of Aberrations during my hellish spring break would be considered the greatest of them—failing to save Oikura or Hanekawa was already an irreversible failure.

But, among them all, there was one choice I seemed to have made correctly.

My choice in a life partner.

"Hitagi, I—"

I was about to say something, whatever it was I was about to say, but at that moment, a sudden gust of wind blew. To call it a gust would be an understatement—it was a gale-force blast.

It was the sort of gale that could be called an instantaneous typhoon, considering it didn't exist on the weather radar a second ago. In an instant, my vinyl umbrella flipped inside out, breaking all of its bones. It took me back to high school where this phenomenon happened to me instead, but that didn't stop me from getting soaked, again, for two nights in a row. The gale blew past us like an arrow shooting through the eye of the giant centipede. I instinctively embraced Hitagi, and found that the wind, comparable to the rush of air before entering a cleanroom, had dried our hair and clothes. And then—

Then, stars filled the sky.

The thick, dark rainclouds that concealed the sky, darker than night and deeper than darkness, vanished in an instant, revealing the spectacle of stars that now rained down on us so generously.

Come rain or spears—

Or a shower of stars—

It wasn't a meteor shower, but the stars shone with a brilliance that could have easily been mistaken for the Aurora—I instinctively tightened around Hitagi as I held her close.

Hitagi, too, clung to me, her fingers digging into my back as if to say she couldn't believe the sight before our eyes—not unlike a mythical

fox wanting to possess me.

Indeed, mountain weather may be fickle, but this transformation was something else entirely. This phenomenon, the polar opposite of a fox's wedding, seemed nothing short of miraculous. The sea of stars looming over us in panoramic grandeur nearly crushed us under its weight—the sheer beauty of it made the hair on my neck stand on end.

Knowing that this was a famous spot for stargazing, I should have expected such a breathtaking sight, but its impact made me forget even to breathe, almost forgetting the very beating of my heart.

This view was anything but bleak.

Where else could one find scenery like this? Could it not rival the starry skies of New Zealand, which, like the Toshogu Shrine, may one day receive World Heritage designation?

Here, in Nikko, the stars shine like nothing else.

If you haven't seen Nikko, you haven't seen anything.

Despite never having set foot in the Southern Hemisphere, I was struck by the whimsical nature of tourists—but I was completely captivated.

On cloud nine, so to speak.

Utterly mesmerized.

"Beautiful…"

Even Hitagi, who was far more experienced and well-versed in stargazing than I, was at a loss for words, barely managing to whisper her awe.

It was hard to believe that just moments ago we had been engaged in a heated debate. As if in harmony, we hugged, and without a care for the dirt on our clothes, we both sat down, somewhere between here and there.

No, we lay down.

With our hands still intertwined.

Just as we had on that very first date.

The ground was completely dry—was this the blessing of the snail goddess, or perhaps the searing stones of hell ready to burn unfillial souls like ours? The latter seemed more likely, but in truth, it was neither.

I thought it wasn't a meteor shower, but before we lay down, I caught sight of a shooting star in the sky; reflecting faintly against the surrounding stars, it shone uniquely like the Milky Way, taking the shape of a golden-haired girl.

The constellation of the Little Girl?

A girl with bat-like wings sprouting from her back—biologically impossible and aerodynamically implausible.

Yet, with my enhanced vision (although not quite a telescope), I could clearly see the shooting star, and even the giant sword she carried with her.

A sword, not a bow and arrow.

A legendary sword.

She cleaved through the clouds—no, the sky itself. Refusing to curve even once. In a single leap, she slashed straight through in one decisive stroke.

As if demonstrating the proper way to slay monsters.

Boldly and proudly.

"Kaka…"

Again, I couldn't help my vampiric laugh. Laughter was all I could muster—what a feat of strength. To be sure, her vitality has, by some measures, increased like my vision had. But to think she would use the strength originally prepared to battle a nine-tailed fox for the sole purpose of splitting the heavens.

Really, an elaborate escapade.

Just to show my wife and me the starry sky spread above us, altering even the weather itself. It was a feat worthy of the former King of Aberrations. You're clueless about human society, but you're the best at surprising us, Shinobu.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you."

I whispered my gratitude three times.

Just like wishing upon a shooting star—but uncertain if it was voiced in time or not. Even with enhanced eyesight, the single streak of light that flashed as the mighty sword was lost among the galaxy of stars.

Leaving the rest to you young two.

I felt those words coming from the six hundred-year-old girl.

“That’s—” I spoke.

I remember that day as if it were only yesterday—though it now seems so far away, the treasure I received from Hitagi had become a treasure of mine as well.

“—That’s Deneb, Altair, and Vega, right? The Summer Triangle?”

“Full marks.”

A thousand marks even.

As she said this, much like a tutor giving lessons for entrance exams, my dear wife gently leaned in close to me, still hand in hand.

And so, today became a day to remember for us.

For our little family.

Husband, wife, and daughter.

025

And now for the epilogue, or rather, the punch line.

The day after returning from my trip to Oku-Nikko in Tochigi Prefecture, on which we had used up our extra day visiting the Oya History Museum, I was greeted by none other than Chief Kouga of Naoetsu Station's Hearsay Department, and her boss, the ever-youthful Gaen-san, with whom I had not met in so long that I couldn't recall the last time. They gave me an incredibly intense scolding, one that made me wonder if it was really possible for a person to be scolded so much, let alone a working adult like myself—I would have understood if I were still in high school or even a university student. In all honesty, I felt like crying.

Part of me wanted to retort, to ask what reward this was for having devoted myself to my job in the midst of my honeymoon. But, if their chastisement was meant not for me, but for Shinobu, who is under my care and protection, I had no choice but to willingly accept it.

After all, it is the parent who bears the responsibility for their child.

That night, the shooting star I had witnessed—Oshino Shinobu—had not used her own legendary sword, the "Aberration Killer" derived from Shishirui Seishirou's "Kokorowatari," to brilliantly slash through the overcast sky.

As the name suggests, that mythical blade was specialized in slaying aberrations and couldn't cut through even the frail human skin. Therefore, it was utterly incapable of cutting through clouds, raindrops, or even water vapor—it was beyond dull.

Had the rain we encountered been the trick of a nine-tailed fox, the sword would have displayed its maximum effect, but it was nothing more than an extremely common, natural phenomenon.

So what was the great sword that my shooting star had wielded that night?

It turns out that this was related to the temporary closure of the Treasure Museum at Futarasan Chugu Shrine, located next to Lake

Chuzenji. Just before Hitagi had charged up Irohazaka in her minivan, Shinobu had slipped out of my shadow in the midst of the crowds while I was lost in a daydream, or rather meditation, and warped to Chugu shrine. From there, she managed to swipe the sacred blade, Nenekirimaru, that was on display in the Treasure Museum.

Warped?

No, it wasn't a vampire skill, but rather the connection between the shrines that acted as a navigation—in any case, Shinobu daringly took a shortcut up Irohazaka, and somehow brought out a national treasure-class Japanese sword, without permission.

With that legendary sword, she dispelled the thick rainclouds.

All for the purpose of gifting us a starry night sky.

"You know, Koyomin, taking out Nenekirimaru for your own use is a serious crime on its own. But changing the weather? That's a huge deal. Hasn't Kouga told you that the air is connected all around the world? By clearing the skies above Senjougahara, do you realize how many areas suffered heavy downpours as a result? Everywhere but where you were—Tochigi Prefecture, the Killing Stone—turned into a rainstorm like a fox's wedding. It's such a disaster that Tamamo-no-Mae's revival is nothing in comparison. Seriously, I wouldn't be surprised if there were landslides all over the place. It's just a coincidence that there wasn't any significant damage."

I had hoped Gaen-san would praise me when we met again, but to the utmost disappointment—as far as I know, I'm the only one who's ever been scolded so much by this gentle, ageless and wise lady.

"Yes, neither my honor student Kouga, nor Yotsugi, Kaiki, or even Meme, have ever experienced a scolding like this."

"Heh."

"What are you laughing at, Koyomin? We're not done with the lecture, but you seem to be in good spirits. Did something good happen?"

Oh yeah.

Though it was just a tiny bit, I felt as if I had surpassed the seemingly transparent intentions of the man in a Hawaiian shirt—and of course, after exhibiting its remarkable cutting ability, Nenekirimaru was returned to the treasure museum.

Neither chipped nor dulled, and with a sheen to rival even the stars themselves, it had grown even more radiant.

Well, if that hadn't been the case, I would have gotten the chop, professionally and biologically speaking.

But since it didn't happen, and I didn't have to meet with my wife in prison, I owed a great debt of gratitude to Gaen-san, who went to great lengths on my behalf—more than I can ever express. But I must likewise thank Kanbaru Suruga.

It's a mystery how she managed to pull it off, or who she pulled her strings with, and I have no intention of digging too deep. But somehow, she was able to find Shinobu even before we reached Senjougahara.

She was on par with the CIA.

Unfortunately, she didn't make it in time for the theft of the Nenekirimaru, but even at that point, Shinobu's drastic plan—I won't go into the details, but had it been executed, it wouldn't have been just the sky that was torn apart; Tochigi Prefecture itself might have been split in two, just like the Utsunomiya Gyoza Statue or the stone. However, before it could be carried out, Kanbaru Suruga discovered the missing girl and, after a struggle reminiscent of six years ago, managed to realistically sophisticate the situation.

It wasn't that she saw no evil, spoke no evil, and heard no evil.

She saw, spoke, and she made her hear.

I was grateful for that alone, but when Kanbaru, the medical student, got involved in Shinobu's cloudy sky surgery plan, even Gaen-san couldn't bring herself to execute us—Kanbaru's mother was her one and only Achilles heel.

We were protected by our junior's prestige.

The epitome of a life lived through connections.

"Well, well, Gaen-senpai, that's enough. Despite everything, Assistant Inspector Araragi has done the bare minimum of what he was expected to do," said Chief Kouga, offering me a follow-up in the end —though it came too late.

"The Killing Stone split naturally, like the weather—you guys who cut through the cloudy sky with brute force say so, so there's no doubt. At

least for now.”

“For now? You’re leaving room for doubt, Chief Kouga.“

“It’s a weak doubt though. The Killing Stone might feel lonely if we assert that there’s no nine-tailed fox, just like Toshogu Shrine would be lonely without Hidari Jingorou. And I want to try those Nasu dishes someday too.”

With that last remark, Chief Kouga concluded her lecture—in her own peculiar way. In any case, that marked the climax of the honeymoon for the Araragi couple.

Ah, well…

No more the Araragi couple—that was in the past.

The beginning of our story was about Senjougahara Hitagi marrying Araragi Koyomi, and thus becoming Araragi Hitagi. In order to mourn the loss of her family name, we decided to go on a honeymoon in Tochigi Prefecture. It was filled with countless twists and turns, but looking back on the trip, there was no question that it was wonderful. However, before long, the very foundation of its meaning was turned upside down.

Even married, Hitagi continued to work at the Japanese branch of her foreign finance firm. Shortly after our honeymoon, she found herself modestly involved in a historic event—or rather, it would be modest to say that she was involved, because in truth she was at the heart of the storm.

It seemed that, while her cell phone had been turned off during our time in Senjougahara, an unimaginable, man-made global economic crisis had occurred somewhere on Earth, and her company bore the brunt of it. Being in the thick of it all, there was no way I could stay out of the matter either, so I ended up getting involved as both a husband and an FBI trainee—in the end, we managed to resolve the situation.

It was a hard-won battle with some underhanded tricks thrown in, but we persevered.

As the price for regaining tranquility, however, our little family—Hitagi, me, and our daughter—had to make a major change in our lives for at least a short while. Both the boathouse and the trailer house needed to be given up.

In a word, we were now part of the Witness Protection Program.

We had to change our names entirely and wait patiently for the storm to pass. Hence, we are no longer Araragi Koyomi or Senjougahara Hitagi; not even Araragi Hitagi. Neither Oshino Shinobu nor Araragi Shinobu.

Separate surnames, separate identities.

It must be rare for a family to deal with the delicate issue of shared surnames in such a dynamic fashion, but it was so like us. We had no idea how long we'd have to live like this until the dust settles, but I'm genuinely happy to have shared this unique experience with my dear wife and beloved daughter. Perhaps this is what one should call true family unity. Once again, we find happiness in sharing mercilessly poured misfortunes, and I believe we are the happiest in the world.

But this is not the happy ending.

Our happiness has only just begun.

Hmm? So, what's the new name for our family, you ask? Come now, it's not raining, so don't go pouring such stand-offish questions. We've been together for so long, after all, you're practically family to me.

We may disappear for a while.

But if you ever miss us, feel free to call out to us however you like.

Afterword

As I continue this series for as long as it takes a newborn to grow into adulthood, it's only natural that I sometimes find myself thinking about things that I can't help but think about. Education that comes with growth is an incredibly difficult thing. While education is a perspective of those who impart it, it could be argued that for the recipients, it amounts to learning. No, I am not judging its content or evaluating its merits. Once imparted, education is difficult to reverse, and in today's trendy parlance, reskilling, or unlearning, is a challenge we face daily. There is a saying that what a child learns at three lasts a lifetime, which proves that the proverbs learned in early childhood are invariably passed down through generations. The theories learned as children, even if overturned later on, inevitably stick with us. Take for instance, while in theory dinosaurs are ancestral to birds with feathers, it may be challenging for certain generations to accept. Likewise, even though it is said that current is the flow of electrons, but its direction is opposite, the rule cannot be bent. Or, when they say that the age of adulthood is eighteen, then Araragi-kun would have already been an adult in Hitagi Crab. However, some of the things we read in textbooks as children, and even books other than textbooks, are not only no longer true today, but can even be contrary to facts. Despite understanding that times change, it seems our brains are bugged and unable to reset once learned concepts… People tend to say that schoolwork has no bearing on their future, but even if it didn't serve a distinct purpose, perhaps it's rooted more firmly than we'd like to think. The same goes for knowledge acquired outside of school… It might explain why we find the comics we read as kids to be the most enjoyable—they've shaped our identity.

And with that, we have a long-awaited return to the Monogatari series! This particular volume might have easily been placed within Second Season, but in hindsight, it was deemed that presenting it in this point in time was for the best, as the chronology could have become quite tangled otherwise. Looking back, the three arcs of Bakemonogatari's first volume—"Hitagi Crab," "Mayoi Maimai," and "Suruga Monkey"—could be considered the "Senjougahara Trilogy," a story of healing for her. Having passed eighteen years since then, it is with great joy as a creator to once again cast the spotlight on her. It seems like only yesterday compared to the battle on Senjougahara, though. And so we have the first addition to the Monogatari Series' Family Season: "Ikusamonogatari."

As always, VOFAN-san's stunning portrayal of the starry sky on the cover leaves me at a loss for words. My deepest thanks. Should there be a second part to the Family Season, it would presumably be "Tsugimonogatari,"[31] another long-neglected story.

NISIOISIN

Translator's Afterword

The splitting of the Killing Stone (Sessho-seki) was a real event which sparked much discussion, especially given the stone's place in Japanese folklore. On March 5, 2022, the stone was found completely cleaved in two, likely due to natural weathering over time. According to legend, the stone contained the spirit of a nine-tailed fox demon. The breakage led to speculation on the internet that the demonic spirit had now been freed to torment Japan.

As the legend goes, the nine-tailed fox Tamamo-no-Mae once transformed into a beauty to seduce Emperor Toba, causing his illness. After the Onmyoji Abe-no-Yasunari forced Tamamo-no-Mae to reveal its true form, the Emperor sent 80,000 soldiers and Abe-no-Yasunari to destroy the demon. Though eventually killed, its lingering resentment caused the corpse to become a big stone that spreads poisonous gas to kill everything around it. A famous monk then used a ritual rod to shatter the stone into fragments scattered all over Japan. In fact, Japanese volcanoes are very active, and stones near volcanoes easily adsorb toxic gases, killing nearby animals and birds. Hence, the "killing stones" are marked with monuments.

For a little more context, you were able to read this story early thanks to my good friend xziomal0321xpl2, who provided me with a copy of the book and was part of my motivation, nudging Nisio Isin's point about the power and value of human connections. Shoutout also to Studentofethereum, who helped proofread the chapters, and JoeOf_Rivia, who made this EPUB version. And thank YOU for reading my amateur attempt at translating a Nisio Isin novel. Not to

Conmal (whentranslatorscry)

Notes

[←1]

Originally: “DV”. Refers to domestic violence in Japan, where men who were previously reserved but become violent after marriage are called “DV Men”.

[←2]

Dragging empty cans behind a car is a couple activity, the loud clatter they produce being a symbol of auspiciousness.

[←3]

Tokyo Narita Airport is the largest international airport in Japan, and a necessary stop for many newlywed couples traveling abroad. However, because some shortcomings or habits of each person are exposed during the trip, many couples choose to divorce after leaving Narita Airport when their honeymoon comes to an end.

[←4]

Haneda: Tokyo Haneda Airport. Kanku: Kansai International Airport.

[←5]

Nikko is a city in Tochigi pref., and にっこり(nikkori) means charming smile.

[←6]

His name, Saru, means monkey.

[←7]

This entire sentence is a Japanese phrase, typically using “parent” instead of “boss.” Literally: there is not a single waste in a thousand of a parent’s opinions, just as with eggplant flowers.

[←8]

ワイフ, literally “wife” in English. 妻(tsuma) is the name for one’s wife. 愚さん(Mrs.) is the name for others’ wives.

[←9]

豚児(tonji) is something of an archaic way to call your child. The characters 豚 and 児 literally mean pig child separately.

[←10]

出羽守(dewanokami) is someone who likes to cite examples from other countries or other industries for criticism.

[←11]

This comes from the game Go, mocking those who think for a long time but still make a bad move.

[←12]

Comparison: 暦 (koyomi) meaning “calendar,” and the first kanji in 歴史 (rekishi) meaning “history.”

[←13]

Sodachi is a verb meaning “to grow”, and sodatanai is its negative form. This joke was actually first made in Owarimonogatari audio commentary narrated by Sodachi and Hitagi. That is the conversation Sodachi references shortly after.

[←14]

翼(tsubasa) means wing.

[←15]

Pun: 腐れ縁(tosare-en) meaning bad but inseparable bond and 不貞腐れる (futekusareru), to become unfaithful.

[←16]

上さん (kami-san): The word for “one’s wife” sounds like 神 (kami), which means “god.”

[←17]

忍野〆〆〆 (Oshino shime shime shime): The symbol 〆 is called “shime” and resembles the katakana character メ.

[←18]

Black Jack is the titular character from 1970’s manga “Black Jack”, a highly skilled and mysterious surgeon known for operating outside conventional boundaries of medicine. He is

capable of performing miraculous surgeries and usually takes on near-impossible cases.

[←19]

Turtle Soup is a guessing game in which you repeatedly ask questions from a seemingly strange set of questions to arrive at an answer. It is also called lateral thinking quiz. The rules are simple, so even children can play.

[←20]

Pun on the 細 in 細々 meaning “little details,” and 細君, yet another word for “wife.”

[←21]

日光 (Nikko) means “sunlight.”

[←22]

The original sentence is awkward for the sake of making a pun with the words 養女 (adopted girl), 幼女 (little girl), and 妖女 (yokai girl, like vampiress), all pronounced the same way (yojo).

[←23]

Sainokawara, said to be the bank of the Sanzu River. Where children supposedly go if they die too young to commit any actual sins and have to keep piling up stones all day long to atone for the sins of their parents..

[←24]

笠(kasa) is a traditional Japanese monk hat which functions as an umbrella. The original pun is with Kasa Jizo, referring to an old tale about a poor man offering his homemade bamboo hats to a line of Jizo statues.

[←25]

宇宙(space) and 雨中(in the rain) are read the same way.

[←26]

Oishinbo is a cooking manga.

[←27]

The phrase 身も蓋もない (mi mo futa mo nai) means “blunt”

or “frank,” similar to 率直な (soochoku na) mentioned in the line above. However, the literal meaning is “no containers and no lids.” Additionally, 味 (aji) can be read as み (mi), so 「ひと味もふた味も（違う）= totally different」 can be read as ひとみもふたみも (hitomi mo futami mo), which sounds very similar to the first phrase.

[←28]

看板 can mean signboard and also appearance.

[←29]

Realm of the gods in Shinto.

[←30]

日光(nikko) means sunlight.

[←31]

接(tsugi) means connection.